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Mar.-Apr., 1988

Indian Literature

Sahitya Akademi's Literary Bi-monthly

IN THIS ISSUE
POET MAHJOOR OF KASHMIR
POEMS BY NINE POETS
FOUR SHORT STORIES, ETC.





WHO'S WHO OF INDIAN WRITERS

Supplementary to the 1983 Volume

The Sahitya Akademi published a *Who's Who of Indian Writers* in 1983 containing biographical and bibliographical information about nearly 6,000 living Indian writers. A supplementary to this volume to cover those who have been inadvertently left out in the main volume of 1983 is now under preparation. Any writer with one or more publications to his credit is entitled to an entry in it. Those who have not yet sent in their entry form are requested to do so immediately. Blank entry forms can be had from:

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Indian Literature

Sahitya Akademi's Literary Bi-monthly

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Indian Literature

Sahitya Akademi's Literary Bi-monthly

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Dear Reader,

At the Parting Hour

WITH this March-April number, the present editor bids farewell to the *IL*, after editing it for four years, bringing out a total of 24 issues (from No. 101 to 124), and incidentally to the Sahitya Akademi also, after serving that august body in various capacities for a little over thirtyone years.

What should be the theme of the Editorial Note of this valedictory number of his? Ideally, it could be some sort of a self-assessment, an account of his own performance in the past four years, rendered to himself and his readers. This should be the time to ask: what were the tasks before him within the guidelines set forth for the journal; how much of them could be accomplished and how; what are the areas where much more could have been done; and what, in general, are the problems and challenges before a journal of this kind in the country. In this process of heart-searching, it is likely that one's thoughts become rambling and subjective and the tone somewhat personal, for which he would crave the indulgence of the readers.

The guidelines whatever were already there, contained in the title of the journal itself. That is, to take in the reverse order, 'Literature' with the overriding qualification that it should be 'Indian'. The parameters of such a literature in terms of the time-space continuum are clear and self-defined: They stretch

INDIAN LITERATURE

back in time to some three thousand years to vedic times and flow down to the living moment, in twentytwo major literatures spread over this vast country *plus* some lesser-known ones with a good body of oral literatures.

If there is such abundant wealth at the one end, there is at the receiving end a body of English-knowing readers, small yet big, small compared to the total of the country's literate mass in terms of percentage and big because they are considerable in number, as much or more than the population of many of the countries of the world, and influential by virtue of the position which the language enjoys.

Ironically enough, this vast public, although much advanced in other matters, are ridden by apathy and ignorance in so far as their own literary heritage is concerned. They do not know what great bounties they are heir to, and that is where a journal like the *IL* steps in to play its part.

The task of the journal is to introduce and interpret the best in all the literatures of the country through creative translations and critical writings with a view to increasing the literary awareness of the people and relieve their otherwise busy and bored lives with some moments of good reading.

This is by no means an easy task and not certainly one which can be accomplished in a short span of a few years which is just a drop in eternal time. It is an ongoing and continuous effort. It may not be a tall claim that this effort has received quite a boost in the last four years because of a new orientation the journal has been given and many changes that have gone into it. The fact that in these four years the circulation has gone up from less than a thousand copies to 2,500, that many of the back-numbers have been sold out to the last copy and these as well as the panoramic spread-out of the literary material in terms of variety, the number of literatures covered and the writers represented, as could be evidenced from the annual index published in the last issue of each year, should be proofs that the journal which was largely of library and archieval interest has grown into an active literary catalyst and it has enlarged the

DEAR READER

dents earlier made into bigger cracks of light.

Further, the eagerness with which each issue is looked forward to in many quarters with reminders pouring in from the readers when their copies are delayed in despatch or transit, the feedback received from them soon after the publication of each issue, frequent reviews and notices in the press, writers from various parts of the country seeking permission to translate and publish the material from the *IL* into their languages and similarly TV producers rendering the stories in it into their medium are also indicative of the useful purpose the journal has been serving.

The discerning readers will no doubt have taken note of the changes and innovations referred to above. Yet, to recapitulate the important ones, for the purpose of record:

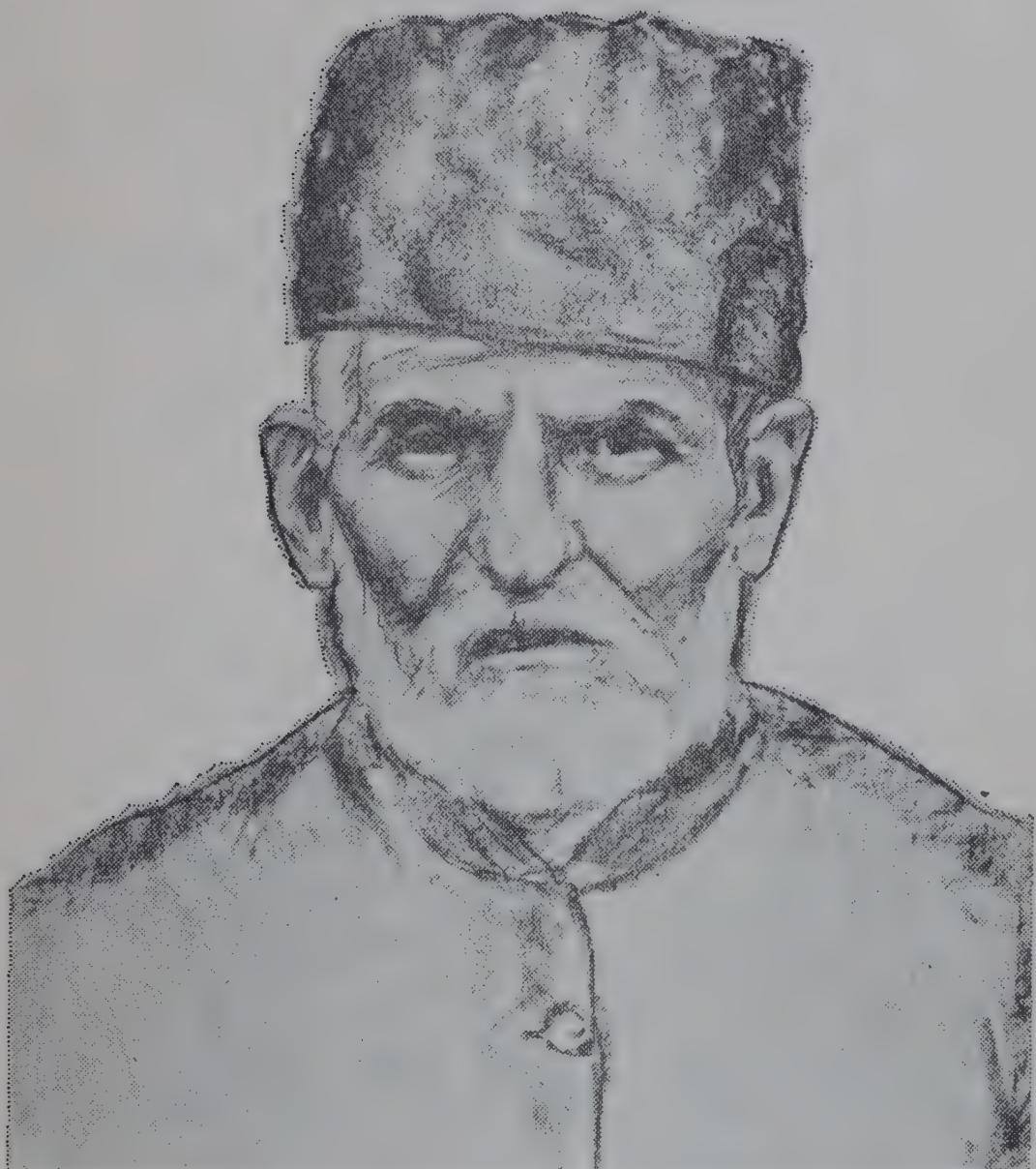
- (a) In accordance with the avowed objective, restricting to the projection of Indian literature only, except for an occasional note or an interview in case of visiting poets and writers from abroad;
- (b) maintaining better standards in the choice of the material, its organisation, editing and presentation;
- (c) bringing in a thematic approach in the presentation of the material to make better impact, particularly in poetry and critical studies;
- (d) maintaining a certain balance in parcelling out the space, language-wise, genre-wise, period-wise, so that none of them became overweight;
- (e) adopting a catholic outlook in projecting writings belonging to diverse movements like the classical, romantic, modern, experimental, progressive, etc., without allowing personal predilections to sneak in;
- (f) introducing new features like 'In the Creative Vein', 'Writers and their Works', etc.;
- (g) bringing into the fold of contributors more writers, both young and old;
- (h) organising round-tables like the ones on 'Tagore's Relevance Today', 'What's a Good Poem', etc.;

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- (i) bringing out special numbers or planning special features as on the Creative World of Our Women-Writers, Short Short Story, etc.;
- (j) highlighting the Award-winning works of the Sahitya Akademi and the Bharatiya Jnanpith, with one issue devoted to them every year;
- (k) taking note of occasions like Birth-Centenaries and demises of great writers;
- (l) providing samplings from the works of writers whenever they were introduced with critical studies;
- (m) featuring a bibliography of literature from Indian languages in English translation and of critical works on them once a year;
- (n) indexing the contents of each volume in the last issue of the year; and
- (o) enhancing the artistic appeal of the journal with drawings and paintings of well-known artists to generate an inter-arts culture among the writers and the artists.

If these can be considered plus-points, on the minus account are areas where more could not be done for want of proper writers and translators from some languages, i.e., those who could write well in English on their literatures or translate from them. There are certain language-pockets in which Delhi is patently poor. Northern languages like Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and Sindhi do not pose much of a problem, but when it comes to a question of some languages of the east, west and the south, one draws a near blank. What to talk of translators, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to find even one knowledgeable person in some languages for consultation. For even small things, one has to stretch and strain his hands in trying to reach the right person in the home-states of those languages and wait for a reply that may never come. After all, the editor is only an intermediary, a pipe-line that brings in water to thirsty readers. But he cannot create water himself. The ideal situation for a journal like the *IL*

Continued on p. 154



MAHJOOR

People's Poet of Kashmir

A Birth-Centenary Feature

Mahjoor, a People's Poet

SHANTIVEER KAUL

THE CREDIT of rescuing Kashmiri poetry from its stultified medieval mystic overtones and restoring to it its long-lost romantic voice goes to Ghulam Ahmad Shah 'Mahjoor', whose birth-centenary was celebrated in 1987¹. In the true sense of the term, Mahjoor is a poet of the people and his songs have become the joyous possession of the masses.

Mahjoor was born in Mitrigam, a small village in Kashmir, in 1887, in a highly orthodox muslim family. He had his formal schooling in Islamic theology. For the most part of his life, he worked as a *patwari*, a petty village official.

Within this dull, drab chrysalis grew the genius of Mahjoor, a true renaissance figure. The turn-of-the-century literary scene in Kashmiri was typically medieval. The sufi or mystic poetry had become moribund and there was no continuation of the romantic tradition of poets like Rasul Mir. The early feeble efforts of Mahjoor, between 1905 and 1918, were in Urdu and Persian. But thereafter he made his debut in Kashmiri with his maiden song, 'Poshay Mati Jaanaano' which was no doubt an inspired attempt. He displayed in it a sure feel for the language, rare craft and a delightfully native metaphor, refusing to be drawn into the crypto-mystic genre that permeated his milieu.

1. The exact year of birth is in question. Some place it in 1885.

INDIAN LITERATURE

He had found liberation from the rarefied world of the so-called cognoscenti.

That Mahjoor chose to write in the romantic tradition is significant. When he came on the scene, the mystic poetical tradition, in spite of having too many practitioners, was on the wane. There had not been any major voice in the great tradition of Lal Ded for quite some time. The sundry exceptions were Shamas Fakeer, Krishen Razdan and a few others. The romantic tradition, on the other hand, was languishing for want of an exponent. It received the touch of a true master in Mahjoor. He rediscovered the melody of his language and his diction was never designed or elitist. His was the natural diction of the countryside. He was at home with his people and their pleasures and pains. Mahjoor achieved immense popularity in his life-time. Poetry had been predominantly an oral tradition in Kashmiri, but Mahjoor was printed and circulated by thousands. His songs were widely sung. This was in a large measure due to the efforts of Mahmood Shahri, his travelling minstrel.

Mahjoor is surely one of the most-sung poets of Kashmir. He has a great ear for the music of words. His structures remain fascinating studies of distributive balance in rhythm and complex use of secondary and tertiary rhyme. And yet he is disarmingly native. His metaphor has the vibrancy of originality, but it is never strident. He made pioneering forays into uncharted territories without ever becoming pretentious. He can be rightly called a bridge between the medieval and modern periods of Kashmiri literature.

Mahjoor's was a romantic revival of the legacy of Rasul Mir, but even his earliest poems were not clones of that worthy forbear of his. His poems are an invocation of the beloved. They also convoke the wind and the brook, the flower and the moon at the same time. It is a loving chiaroscuro where the beloved does not exclude the blossoming bud or supplant it. It is a seamless texture where the poet can travel across a wide spectrum of poetic concerns with ease. It was natural for Mahjoor to write nature poems and social poems, poems of

MAHJOOR, A PEOPLE'S POET



Drawing : Jai Zharotia

brooding and of revolution. He did not conform to a particular genre, he was part of an ongoing tradition and evolution. This propelled him into the historic role of bridging the gap between the anaemic and sometimes vacuous expression of the turn-of-the-century poets and the modern idiom. He played his role to perfection.

The popularity of Mahjoor among the masses was not enough to storm the rigidly stylized bastion of the mystics. While Mahjoor avoids mystical postures, he borrows freely from the word-hoard of the mystics. It is the manner in which he transmutes the symbols to suit his own expression that he succeeds eminently. And when he does talk about the 'Divine

INDIAN LITERATURE

Omnipresence', he steers clear of the set of symbols which the mystics formulate, to use strikingly fresh images and forms of address. His god is personal, abundant, informal and occasionally equivocal. His effective use of language could ensure the articulation of such concepts in the most lyrical manner. And he chooses the ghazal as his major form.

Although Mahjoor stuck to the classical construct of the ghazal, observing well laid-out rules, standard metres, etc. and indeed displayed mastery in it, he imbued the form with a filigree of his own within the confines of its formalism. His inner rhyme-structure lend great sonority to his ghazals. This form suits his poetry best, although he has produced a number of nazams as well. These nazams are among his lesser-known works and some of them deserve to be ignored, like the one addressed to the Security Council.

A natural corollary of his evolution is the revolutionary tenor that crept in during his last poetic phase. His credentials as a nationalist and a champion of the underprivileged are impeccable and are present in the entire corpus of his work. The manifestation of these concerns is, however, amorphous and circumstantial in the main body of his work. It crystallizes into a cogent expression much later. He is evidently not comfortable with the *agitprop* of poetry. That this tenor blends well with the total ambience of his work and miraculously escapes becoming polemical is a tribute to his poetic genius. He can say with perfect equanimity:

Give up hesitant measures.

Let thunder rumble, let there be an earthquake!

It makes good sense and fair poetry, yet this is not his metier. It is hardly his true identity. His is not the verse that exhorts. It is not meditative or reflective either. It is a joyous celebration of life. It is the song of life, bitter-sweet and precious and universally close to the heart. He is a poet of love, unrequited or fulfilled, divine or mortal. And that is what he will remain for generations of Kashmiris who will continue to love and sing his songs.

Six Love Poems of Mahjoor

These poems are originally written in the ghazal form. Besides the customary structure of *radif* and *kaafiya* and observing regular *behr* (metre), they are replete with inner rhyme and other conscious literary devices which imbue them with rare musicality. Indeed, these are amongst the most-sung Kashmiri songs, and the best-known and most-loved poems of Mahjoor. Significantly, each one has an organic quality that is extrinsic to the ghazal form giving them the quality of a free-flowing narrative and uniform evocation. In the translations that follow, it has been attempted to convey this narrative quality and hence the title 'Six Love Poems'.

At the beginning is provided a roman transliteration of the first verse to give an idea of the rhythm and music of Mahjoor's ghazals to the readers.—Tr.

1

**Ha gulo tohi maa sa vuchhvон yaar myon
Bulbulo tohi tsaariton dildaar myon**

**Vani divan poshan pritsyom yambarzalan
Aav maa tohi kiny su jodoogaar myon**

**Roshi paethy yita poshi baaguk hith karith
Chaani yine pholi dilbaro gulzaar myon**

**Aash roozem yaar vaatyam az pagaah
Yi karaan soraan aav lokechaar myon**

**Khasta dil Mahjoor Sara sapnith vanaan
Tas madanvaaras na saa aav aar myon.**

HAVE you perchance seen my love
 O guls?
 Do please look for my beloved
 O bulbuls!
 Looking for him amongst flowers
 I did ask the daffodils—
 'Did my magician
 Pass by here?'
 Do use the excuse of the riotous spring
 Do steal in, Love
 My garden will burst into bloom
 When you come.

I kept on hoping
 He would come
 Today, or
 Tomorrow
 This is the tale of my depleted
 Youth.
 Mahjoor, heartbroken, knows
 When he says:
 The beloved felt
 No compassion for me.

LOVE
 I am smitten
 By a surpassing beauty
 Your very thought
 Drives me from desert
 To desert.
 For two goblets
 Of the wine of love, two
 Precious jewels, I bought him—

SIX LOVE POEMS OF MAHJOOR

The very one playing truant
With me.
When the lover of love
Distributed largesse, he gave
Jewels to the plainest of stones
Flowers
To the prickly bush.
Do be patient
The garden blooms
In due course
Flowers await no invitation
Brook no queries.
Woken by the pre-dawn call
Of the swallow, I knew
Winter recedes, spring has cast
Its nimbus.
When Mahjoor, liberated, will
Proceed to the garden
The orioles will sing
Flowers light their torch.

3

WHERE has my childhood friend gone
O Saqi
The beloved, solace of my heart?
My most accomplished love
My pearl necklace
O where has he gone?
It is dusk
My destination is nowhere in sight
I have lost my ebullience
O! Whatever happened to my
Happy childhood?
My feet are worn out

In his pursuit, my budding
 Youth is no more
 Where has this stonehearted
 Friend, pitiless
 Creature gone?
 I asked for exotic wines
 Committed myself
 To the Saqi's care
 The surfeit of wine
 Produces nought:
 Where is my intoxication?
 When Mahjoor will savour the garden
 No more
 The hyacinth will ask the iris
 Where has my confidante
 My caring friend gone?
 My beloved, the solace of my heart?

4

O SAQI!
 May your abode flourish
 Till eternity
 May your measure radiate
 The brilliance of sun
 Evermore.
 You will find your true metier
 Next to the flowers
 When the thorns
 Engage your hem at
 Dawn.
 It would move mountains, surely
 Were the 'twain to meet:
 My plaintive calls,
 Your ornate orchestra.

SIX LOVE POEMS OF MAHJOOR

There is no prejudice
Be it believer, or
Heathen
Stranger or kin
For all who come with love
Your table offers
Hospitality.

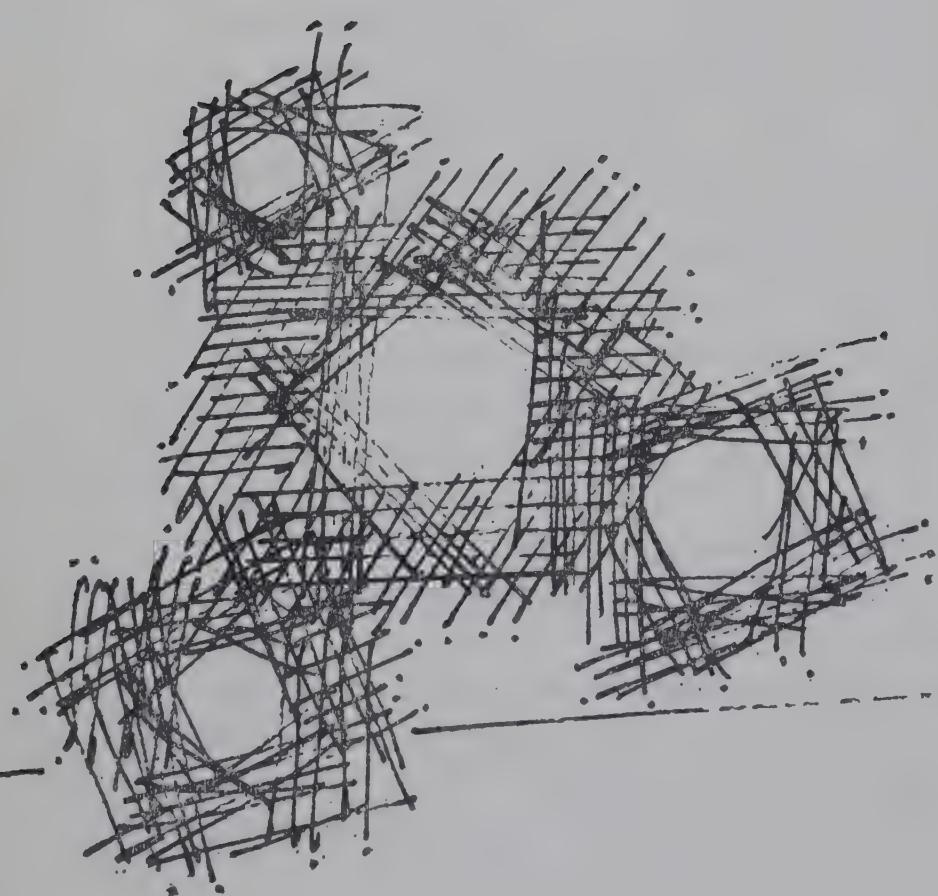
5

STAY awhile, Love!
Hear me, my woes
Your love makes me ail.
You make me seek you so
In hamlet and town
I am whittled down
To a sickle moon, Love!
My nubile form wastes away
Being lovesick is hard on me
I lost a childhood, Love,
On your account.
You heap miseries on me
And
The selfsame you
Are my benediction
Indeed, you are
The wound, you
The liniment, my Love!
Mahjoor would surely
Unburden his heart
But his lips
Are sealed, my Love!

BE perfect, create the Beloved within
 Yourself, remove all blinds
 Emerge from darkness
 Discover the Fountainhead of Beauty
 How long will you be
 A prisoner
 Of curling tresses?
 See the derelict raindrop
 Transcend to a pearl:
 He leapt coolly from the heights
 To a raging storm
 Below.
 I would acknowledge
 Your blessedness,
 Your *jnana*:
 How is your drinking vessel
 Not full of your own
 Lifeblood?
 He may burrow underground
 Or
 Take wing and ascend
 These are the two endowments
 Of man.
 O Mahjoor!
 The only one to achieve
 Is the one who spends
 A lifetime
 Contemplating Ambition.

Tr. from Kashmiri by SHANTIVEER KAUL

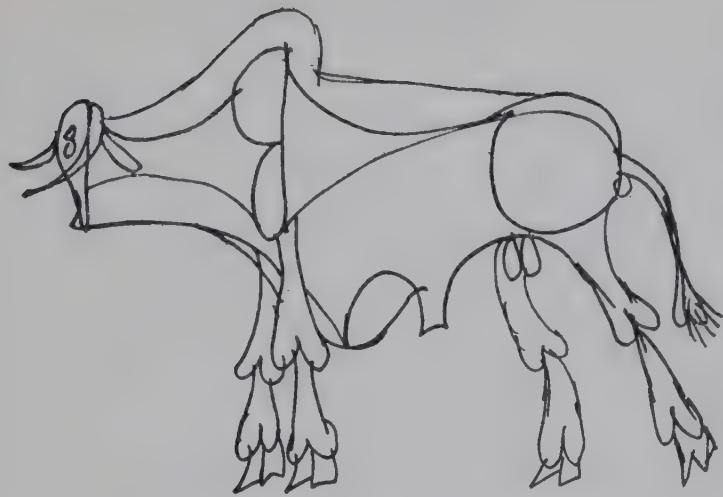
Poems



Since the last few years, the Sahitya Akademi has been organizing a week-long Festival of Letters annually, sometime in February each year, in New Delhi, to coincide with the distribution of its Awards. As part of it, besides a two-day lecture called Samvatsar Lectures delivered by an eminent Indian writer, it holds a Seminar on some contemporary theme and on the last day an Evening of Poetry, where select poets from various languages are specially invited to read their works in their own languages and their translations are provided to the audience.

This year, on the 24 February 1988, at the Poetry Evening, nine such poets, all young and actively writing today, were invited to participate in the programme. The session was presided over by Sri Kedarnath Singh, the well-known Hindi poet. In the following pages, we have pleasure in bringing for the benefit of our readers the translations of the poems that were read. The Feature can rightly be called the 'Poems of Today'.

On this occasion, we also took the opportunity to ask these poets as to "what they try to achieve in their poetry?" The answers we could elicit were diverse and significant, and they are given along with their poems.—*Ed.*



Poems of Today

KEDARNATH SINGH

I declare

AND in the end
I declare
that he who is hale and hearty
is the most sick
he who laughs
deserves sympathy
he who is walking
is in fact standing
he who is speaking
is somewhere silent within himself.

I declare
that he who is truthful
is not really truthful
he who issues orders
is fear-stricken

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“Poetry for me is a social act. Through words, the poet attempts to give meaning to life. And that way, he makes life worth living. I have never nurtured the illusion that poetry can bring about revolutions. But I believe poetry can certainly play its role in creating a congenial intellectual and creative atmosphere for the transformation of life and society.

“The kind of extraordinary pressures which western poetry is exerting on contemporary Indian poetry today is, in my opinion, not good for it. The greatest necessity for a poet today is to overcome such pressures. To be able to do so, it seems necessary once again to link poetry with the creative traditions of the life of the people. It is my conviction that only then that Indian poetry can find its salvation.”

Kedarnath Singh

he who gives judgements
does not know
that he is a prisoner

I declare
that in this undeclared war
where much
is lost
there still remains
some love.

‘Ghoshana’

The Himalayas

“**W**HERE are the Himalayas?”
I asked the boy

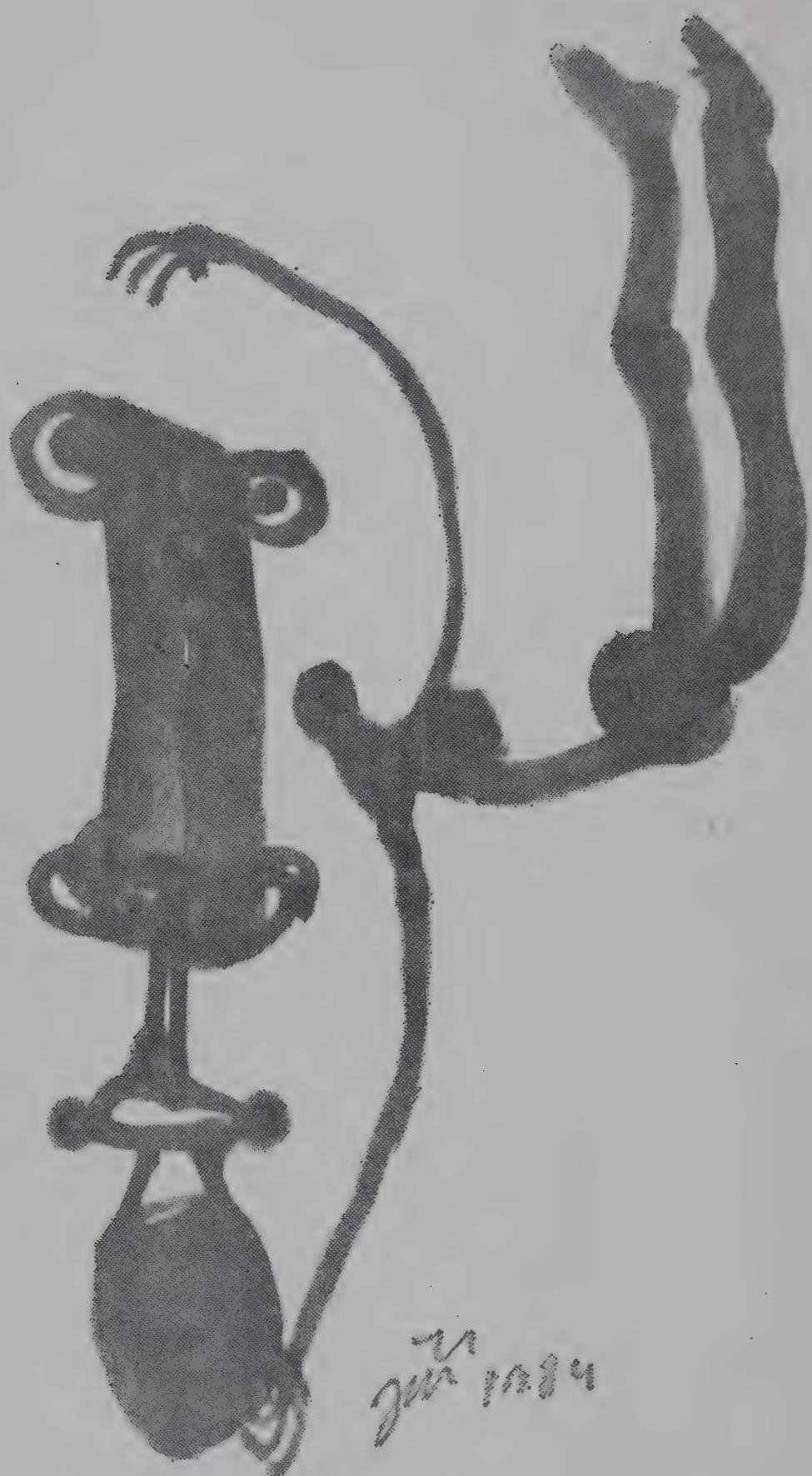
POEMS OF TODAY

who stood flying a kite
outside his school.

“There. . . There. . .”—he cried
pointing to where his kite
was flying away.

I accept :
For the first time I learnt
where the Himalayas were.
‘Himalaya’

Tr. from Hindi by S. BALU RAO



Drawing : Jai Zharotia



RANDHIR KHARE

Wanderers

OLD SNOW cobwebbed frozen rocks,
We pitched tents beside dead pine trunks,
Women lit fires and we smoked,
Sky cracked into crystals overhead.

A muslin bundle in my tent held
Father's bones, prayer scrolls,
A silver coin with an alien head,
An empty book, a length of rope.

All night we heard the wind
Chip splinters from mountain sides,
Dreams came to us:
Dark wolves with moonlight eyes.

There were days and there were nights,
Snow-fields in cool light,

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Our footprints followed
Talking in a naked wind.

Who would ever know that we
Were once the children of the sun,
Fought, won and built our homes
In the valley of summer?

Time shuts behind us, we remain
Wanderers, carrying fragments
Of the past, walking with the wind,
Between worlds.

You who made us, filled us with blood,
You who touched us with longing,
Pulled children from our wombs,
Gave us fire, hear us.

Are we condemned to wander all our lives?
Grass, sunlight, a goat, a child,
A pebbled stream,
Rain, hands of green grain;

Bring the savage thrust of love
To loins, we wrinkle, lord,
We waste and there's no death,
Just the snow grinding our bones.

Lord of summer and homes,
Still us; you stripped us,
Burnt out soles with ice, come now
With the taste of rivers on your lips.

Tonight by torchlight we shall paint
Our story on the skin of rocks

POEMS OF TODAY

"I am concerned with the essential struggle of man to cope with the complexity of living, his need to survive and overcome the onslaught of the age he lives in. I see myself as merely a witness to this struggle. My poetry attempts to reflect this.

"I want my poems to achieve a simplicity of expression, a harmony of image and sound, a purity of form.

"But often a poem rebels against a poet and discovers itself. I am ready for this eventuality. I have no choice."

Randhir Khare

With blood of our dying animals,
And we shall eat their flesh, and sleep.

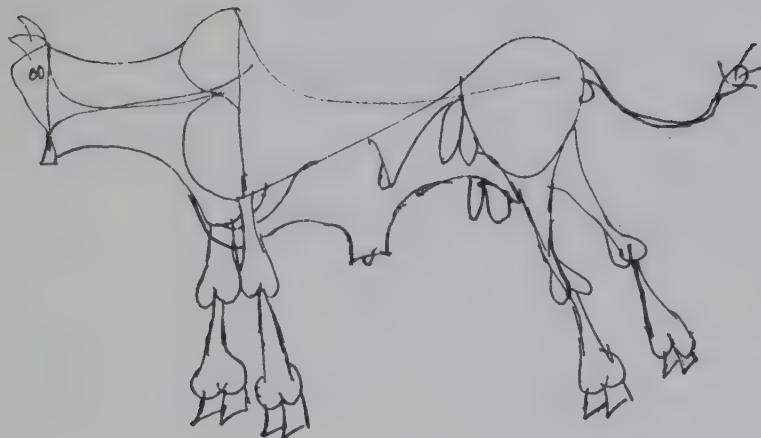
Nostradamus

DEATH, power, hate and history,
Whirl in their orbits like dismembered limbs,
Each blood spot turning to a dark red star,
A solar system spun by a million fears. . .
Fear of the dark, fear of the aging heart,
Fear of the greening gold, moss in the fist,
Fear of the atom clenched between the teeth
Of insane messiahs waiting for a cause.

I watch the planets spin in space,
Dragging their open wounds like purple mouths

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That curse and promise, celebrate the lie,
That plough the flesh of space with savage teeth;
The hands of peace, they cannot seal the wounds,
The Word is lost, the beginning unknown.



SUBHO MUKHOPADHYAY

River, My Friend

THROUGH the night, the river flows
listlessly towards its receptacle.
Within and beyond the river
another river and further beyond
the river's world, its kith and kin
spreading out.

Leaving the dak-bungalow at Sasati
behind the moon cries
in the stretching sky—a silver streak;
a flock of singing birds drift keening.
Here inside us
and abroad
in a cumulus that is sorrow
clouds dwell.

In this world of the sky and forests
the moon gives garlands

of light to us, companionship.
 In this light spread out for weddings,
 renunciation, floats the dolphin—
 Further beyond in the encompassing
 world of death the dry logs
 meant for the funeral pyre
 utter, “Oh how long! how long must
 you dwell in this world of maya.”

In the soft abundant
 Waves of the moonlight
 the river's breast is bare
 alive with pebbles, bits of coloured glass,
 and through the night
 the river flows on
 towards the home of the black birds.
 Our lives too drift like fleecy clouds.

‘Amader Sajal Sakhyata’

Our World

HAVING covered a distance you think of birds,
 It's spring, the air opens its arms.
 That tree in the distance, rooted firmly,
 draws near leaving the forest behind,
 cleaves the stone from the heart,
 scatters it in the darkness
 and kissing the children on the cheeks
 Says, “Smile, be happy!”
 And then the tree returns with its green

POEMS OF TODAY

“To me, poetry appears to be the song of a meaningful existence, the joy of freedom, and the way to reach man. Poetry is an unparalleled potential that takes me down from the highest peak of the world to the overwhelming root of a tree. My poetry is a search for an unfathomable wonder that encompasses man’s path towards love. I wish my poetry were a cure for bruised hearts and a consolation for the bemoaned nature.”

Subho Mukhopadhyay

arms to the stillness in the forest,
to its roots.

The river arrives from miles away,
the river arrives digging its way,
through the bowels of the earth,
arrives where there is sorrow,
men and villages,
holds herself still among the banks,
rippling languidness.

The people have arrived
hearing the ripples,
the wind proclaiming the news of arrival,
the arrival of spring and rejuvenescence
and the river kisses the children
on the cheeks saying, “Smile, be happy!”
With that the river ever in search
of water plunges back
into its own depths.

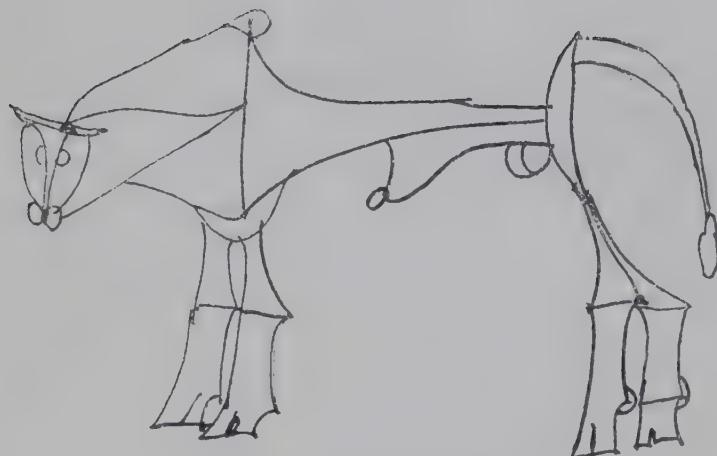
The mountain’s green vastness
opens many windows, doors;
on its brow the mark of renunciation,
brings nevertheless, leaving its solitude,
the cure for all diseases, restlessness,
even dolls for the children

and kissing them utters,
“Smile, be happy!”
And the youth climbs on,
embracing the colossal figure
of stone, merging into the essence.

Now our walls and doors
are resonant with songs,
we sing among the fountains,
our song can be heard
on the heights of monuments
and this we know
as we sing that
covering a distance
you think only of birds,
its Spring, the air opens its arms.

‘Amader Rajyapat’

Tr. from Bengali by SOMESH DASGUPTA



K.V. TIRUMALESH

Inti Pedro

HE cleared his throat
And set it right
Pedro—Inti Pedro.

September 22
Place : Alto Seko

And Pedro made a speech
Brief and effective
His aim:
To make them aware
Of the impending revolution
And of Che.

This was what he said:
Che is our leader
Our friend.

INDIAN LITERATURE

I am Inti Pedro
His follower.

Terrorists we are not
Terrorists are government servants
Toll-gate keepers
Those who sit in market-places
And have a job.
We are one of you—

Do not fear
The dress we wear
Do not suspect
Our beards either
Fidel Castro too
Looks like us
And he smokes
Very large cigars
And is a friend
Of Che Guevara
The rebel.

To make revolution
Is our job
This revolution is for your sake
To throw away the yoke
Of tyranny
To restore to you
Human dignity.
When? When is that day?
Today and now
If you wish.

Fifteen people
Sat like marble
Their tired eyes

POEMS OF TODAY

"Try to see a pattern behind what is apparently chaotic, see beauty behind what is apparently unbeautiful, celebrate the extraordinariness of what is apparently ordinary. So look at persons, things and places more intensely. Transcend the barriers of nationalities, religions and one's own contemporaneity. Create alternate universes so as to overcome a cynical psyche that any sensitive person is bound to discover in the present society. The necessity to create also means the necessity to experiment with the form, with language. Use rhymes, metres and alliterations and also discard them if necessary. A readiness to risk failure."

K.V. Tirumalesh

Sunk
Beyond the afternoon sun.
It was a dilapidated school
With old tiles
And mud-walls
On which obscene graffiti
Refused to erase.
Of those present
Five were the pupils of that school.

Pedro—Inti pedro
Asked himself :
Was it alright what I said?
Was it this that Che had said?
Oh, no! Certainly not!
He opened his mouth to say it again.
But the throat had dried
And words wouldn't come out.
Pedro made some sign
And somebody ran
And brought a tumbler
Of water.
Pedro drank half of it

And washed his face
With the other half.
How cool!
He exclaimed
And the audience agreed.
Where was the sixteenth man?
He was already on the village road
Walking briskly
To fetch the police.

‘Inti Pedro’

Tania

BORN on the mountain
Rio Grande flows into the plain
And joins the sea.
Surging in the gorges
Spread in the open
Still water in the bend
She is like the mind of man
Varied.

Across was Che
Guevara—the Rebel.
That fatal evening
Nine guerilla soldiers
Were on a mission
To join him—
His friends and followers all.
Where the river was shallow

POEMS OF TODAY

They stepped in
One behind the other.

Six o'clock.
The sun set early
In Bolivia.
The night fell like a blanket
All of a sudden.
No stars in the sky—
Only the clouds continued to shine
For some more time.

Ahead of all
Was Joachin—
The leader of the column,
At the very end
Was Tania.
Tania! Ah! I haven't yet
Said anything about her. Now
If I can say anything, it is this:
She was the first
To fall a prey to the bullet.

She was wearing a white blouse
And red stockings—Tania!
The twilight must have stayed on her
Longer than necessary.
Being swept away in Rio Grande
What were her thoughts?
Did she say:
Good-bye to you, Che!
Good-bye, Bolivia!
Did she wonder:
For this water to be so cold
How many icebergs it should have crossed!
Where did the day vanish

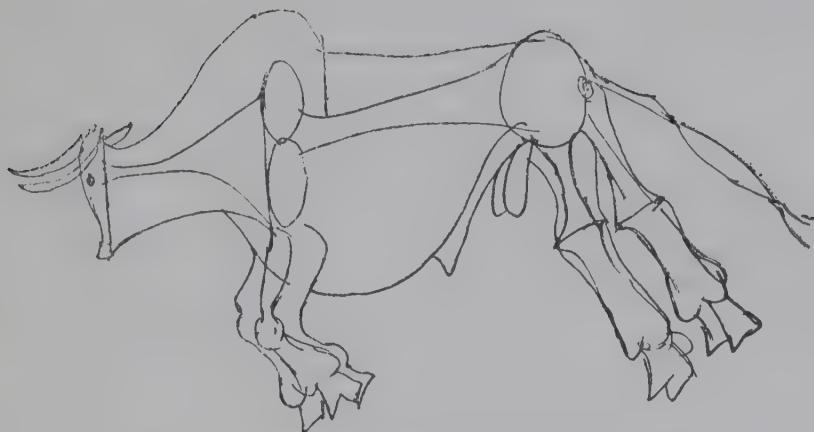
INDIAN LITERATURE

Where did the night go—
Because it is so dark here
So early?

Now whatever we say
Will be the thoughts of others
Not Tania's—
Those who dare to enter into her thoughts
Should first wander
In the forests of Bolivia
Just as she did
And be swept away in Rio Grande
Just like her.

‘Tania’
both from ‘Boliviadalli Che’

Tr. from Kannada by the Poet



VISHNU NARAYANAN NAMBUDIRI

Where is the Face?

“BUT where is the face?” I ask amazed;
Silent as a sage there sits my friend.
In the picture he drew of the grand Carnival
The flags are there, elephants, umbrellas
And crowds of people robed in deep colours.
But no one has a face: is this fellow
A total crank or a great philosopher?

And in the evening as I stand
Restful at my old gatehouse,
A huge procession passes by me:
Those who wear trousers and pants,
Those who wear headgear and cap,
Meticulous in every step.
The leaders whisper to each other thus:
“Where is your face?” “Oh, where is yours?”

As the land slides in my soul far deep
Crammed with the springs of compassion

INDIAN LITERATURE

"The world would have lost nothing if my tongue had been mute by choice or by destiny. But it certainly would have affected my joy of existence. And hence I write, fully aware that my joy seeks fulfilment in sharing it with the like-minded.

"Just as in life, so in poetry too, I have tried to discover and preserve my roots in the cultural tradition of my country. Because thus alone could I brace myself up to meet the challenges of my time. As to technique, I am rather regardless, provided it promotes communication. However, it has been my endeavour to use as far as possible such vocabulary as will find some currency in all the regions of India."

Vishnu Narayanan Nambudiri

For crowds struggling like insects in
Hot oil lamps, I promptly raise
My handkerchief to wipe my tears;
But it touches nothing: What! emptiness?
Startled and stunned I rush to my room
Trembling, and in the mirror on the wall
I take just one look: above the collar
My God! I too have no face at all?
'Mukham Evite?'

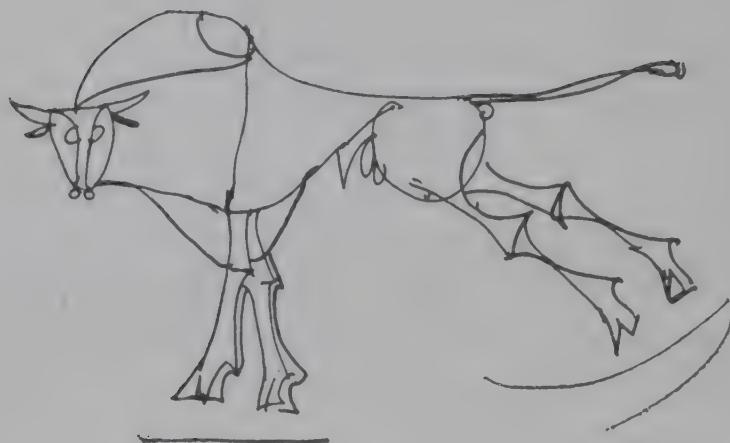
I have seen the Triumphant March of White

I HAVE seen the triumphant march of white
jasmine in bloom, dewdrop on a pebble,
day with a drooping April sun;
the virgin's smile, an aged star in the sky
moving with unerring steps.
I have seen the triumphant march of white—

POEMS OF TODAY

sandal mark on forehead,
the sandy shore where waves practise writing,
the half-open floral spray of the palm tree,
a slice of moon on suckling tender lips.
I have seen the triumphant march of white—
soothing hand on a feverish body,
the faltering of the tongue bidding adieu;
and as the dusk falls, the vague knowledge
that seeps in unconsciously of some hidden mercy;
and the peace that sets in like a glowing ember
as the flames of fiery doubt die down.

‘Venmayute Jaitrayatra’



SOUBHAGYA MISRA

The Boatman

SOMEONE promised him a tip;
another threatened him
and took out a knife to kill him
from under his shirt.
Still another wondered and asked him
if he had no conscience.
Children would be waiting at home;
it was already late in the night.
The boatman refused to untie the boat,
An image of the dark sat
in the dark around.
The flickering lantern in the boat
floated like a pet duckling
in the water.

Someone tried to loosen the knot
of the rope around the post.

POEMS OF TODAY

Another picked up the oars,
and still another dragged the poles
from the boat to the bank.
But none could dare into the boat
for fear of crocodiles, wind and rain.

Another wave of abuse and threat
splashed across the boatman's face.
His eyes began to close.
He was as silent, as still as before.
The end of his shoulder-cloth
fluttered a little in the breeze.

Someone suddenly wondered
if the old boatman was dead.
A leaf fell from a tree.
They forgot their children and business.
The knife returned to its place.
The abuses, threats, and prayers
withdrew like pet ducklings,
into the boats of their mouths.

They groped in the dark and gathered
dry twigs and leaves in a pile.
They shouted to the gods of the ten directions
to bear witness, and lifted
the body of the old boatman
on to the burning pyre
The fire rose like water.
They squatted at a distance and wondered
why they had done so—
in anger, in frustration,
out of a sense of duty?
Was their act one of goodness
or of sin?
Who had killed the old boat man?

Holding the flickering lantern
close to its chest,
the boat floated
all alone,
defying the wind and rain
towards the other bank.

‘Nauria’

Picnic at Taptapani

THE rock too has a mind, a mouth.
At times it fills the concrete pool,
feelingly and with warmth,
with sounds of water.
At others it's cool and hard like the Buddha,
and rolls down along
the thirsty beaks of wood-pigeons.

The purpose of our visit
we have left behind in the car.
The driver has absconded with the key.

The only other purpose
is in the mouth of the rock
at a great height
in the old earth and sky
amidst the old foliage.

The tiger of that invisible emptiness
would never walk, Vinod,
into the cage of your camera.
Yet two of us

POEMS OF TODAY

“What is it that I try to achieve in my poetry? I don’t think that I like the word ‘achieve’. It is so public, so loud. Nevertheless, I have said certain things in my poetry—about my loneliness, my separation from the world out there, my frantic efforts to make sense of what is called love. When I started writing poetry—and that was thirty years ago—everything was simple, certain and beautiful. Gradually, I realized that no absolute was available to me, no resolution was final, and reality was problematic. I divided myself into several sensibilities, perspectives, points of view, for I had to play that neither-nor game. My moral position is indistinguishable from my existential despair. One supplements and intensifies the other. Playing the game, however, has been jolly exciting albeit painful. Inevitably, my poetry is resonant with many voices, each speaking a language of its own and not necessarily in unison with the other. It revels in contradictions, conflicts, ironies, in the drama of arriving yet not arriving at that intermediate point between two calls of a cuckoo where may lie the ultimate mystery, the ultimate truth, who knows!”

Soubhagya Misra

in the manner of competent hunters
turn the carcass of an uneasy moment
and watch it intently.

And a couple of others
are drawing on paper
the hill, the tree, the afternoon sun,
the dog licking the eating-leaves.

A song rises from somewhere
like smoke,
and the clappings
ring with the sounds of Diwali
in a far-off town.

Laughter turns into peanuts

INDIAN LITERATURE

which a crow picks up
and flies off to a jack fruit tree.

Do not ask
who has built the temple,
who has installed the stone
as a god.

We have come here
not to ask questions,
but to pick berries.

The darkness approaches
and see
all of them have vanished.

Someone is saying:
They have gone up the mountain
in a group
looking for the source of the stream.
One cannot hear anything
other than pebbles rolling down
the mountain slope:
one cannot see anything
other than the shaking leaves
and branches of the trees in the mountains.

They have been lost like words.
They have scattered in all directions
like birds.
When they returned
you saw one holding a bunch of wild flowers
and another a small bright stone,
and still another a green twig
or a bird's feather.

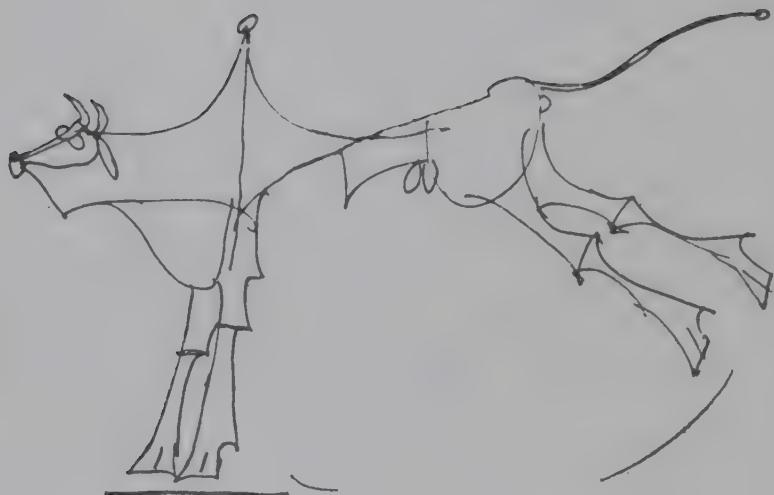
POEMS OF TODAY

Someone is saying:
we met an old tribal
who prevented us
from climbing further and
further up.

Another asks:
why did we come here?
His bruised knee
dotted with blood.

The last sun stopped near him
for a moment,
put off all the lights and left
like the watchman
of an empty bungalow.

‘Taptapanire Picnic’



BRAMHARAJAN

A Letter from a Journey

TO . . . daughter
The blank space above
which would describe you to me
you had better fill it up.
I have to change trains:
I with those here
to see their friends off.
A throng at the stuffy station,
A region remote dusty
its language usage
strange incomprehensible
Seated on a bench with a broken leg
I place a paper on my knees
I write

Your 14th birthday slipped
from my memory.
I forgot to send you a birthday card.
The sun's rays
piercing the tall trees
in the deep woods.
Thoughts of Paul Valery,
his 18-year long silence.
I purchased a statue of Buddha in marble
a replica of a replica of a replica
found at Bhedar Ghats
6½" high. Rs. 132/-
at Sathna railway station.
I dusted my trunk, opened it,
paid the amount.
In my brown shirt
(maroon-coloured in your language)
the soft dust of the white marble.
The porter said, "The stone
is not the right sort."
When it mellows
the boats that move in the Narmada
with sweat will disappear
And you will travel
with the aid of an atom oar
or whatever it will be
in the future.
You will not hear the moaning
of the depths of the river.
The rotting putty dreams will dissolve.
The long nervous agitated brush strokes
of the self-portrait of Van Gogh.
The face of Buddha carved out of wood.
Between the two,
I.
A few more days:

I come back with
the absurd lines of verse
a blue bouquet
a preoccupied mind
along the destined road
the music of the Gwalior gharana
winding through the wheat-fields
the used train tickets
(the stations without
the ticket-collectors)
the sleeplessness
trembling in the eyes
the worn-out shoes
the impressions
of the sculptures of Khajuraho
that Gandhi said should be destroyed
the ship that has come ashore
the sea
the vastness
and

Tr. from Tamil by M.S. RAMASWAMI

An Uncaged Poem

BROWN DAYS of bitterness are over.
I rid myself of the hounds of anxiety
of the big city.
Its filthy river meandering like a gray snake.
A sluggish gut
bearing factories' pissed metal and chemicals.

POEMS OF TODAY

I've abandoned restaurants
serving radio-active fish.

Here I am
before my tiled country house
still refusing to accept its existence.
Country-house appears
like a card-board
as if my absence had altered its dimensions.
Here I am—
far away for a sea roar
too distant for a morning paper
with no cigarette to dispel
crowding geometrical shapes
of many perhapses.
The sun's mellow orange
turns feverish brass.
Withered lime trees
spread their leafless hands
striped with bird-shit.

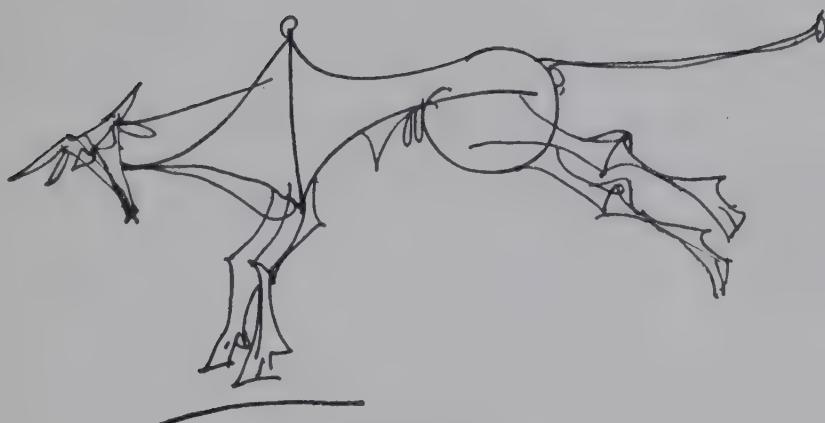
Morning of montages
on the canvas of the brain—
a broken egg-shell and a pomegranate tree
a mongrel in its fly-catching spree
grass sprouting between stones of old bones
mango groves leafing diaphanously
stubbles of a previous harvest
resembling unfinished sentences
of a wasted argument.

Heart-strings tremble abruptly
to the continuing crescendo
of a courting eagle's cry.
A nude descends the spiral stairs of
my mind.

INDIAN LITERATURE

An uncaged poem
emerges
from the folded foliage of a tree
whose name
I shall never know.

Tr. from Tamil by the Poet



NIKHILESWAR

Who mourns for the Unknown?

THE smokescreen of dew
blocked the sky and
Rose high above the sharpened rocks.
Over there survived many V.I.P.s.
Who mocked the death
to mourn the dead and
Pay homage to the unseen powers
In the idols of Hanuman, the Vayuputra.
Through a sentimental journey
One V.I.P. flew thousands of miles
Simply unscratched.
But nearer home, the hands of fire
attempted in vain his life.
But the toilers were mowed down
While mowing grass for the living.
Newspapers at last gave their names
Heralding doles for their survived.

Out of pity, the V.I.P.s inquired about
the unknown unsuspected grass-cutters.
All of them were quite unknown,
Belong to the struggling lot
Who often rise up to prove their salt, though
Often the icy hands of nature twist them.
But the same unknown are
Systematically shot down
Not by the providence
But by the same hands
Which push the levers of power.
‘Anamakulakosam Shokinchedevaru?’

The Violence of Vengeance

A LONG the flowing blood of murders
Burns the violence of vengeance!
How long this ritual of bloodbath
of the human history?

The system of man eating man
Wherever raises its hood
Strikes at every one without mercy,
The ‘protectors’ leap over the mere symptoms
sweeping off the root-causes.

The robots of human flesh make their tea
On the burning pyres of others
And their followers rape even the lifeless!
Now the system walks down
Into the very chapter of its infanticide.

POEMS OF TODAY

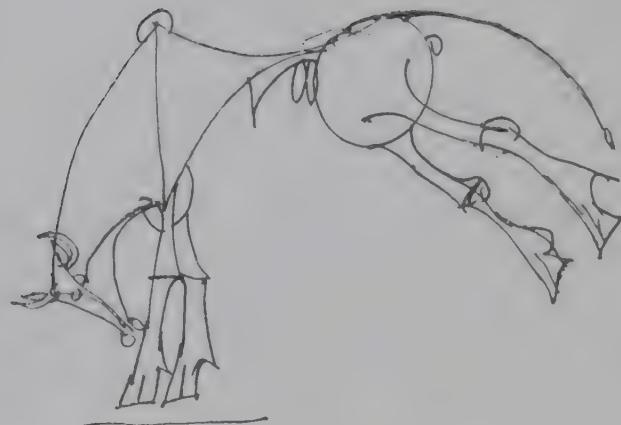
“For me, poetry has been an exploration into truth. The phase-wise search led me from mere romanticism to social protest. My inner self found an expression in my poetry. The Telugu language in which I have been writing compelled me to break new grounds for fresher pastures and red oleanders. So our revolt began in the form of ‘Digambara Kavita’. It opened up all the floodgates of emotions interacting with the world around me. In exposing the inherent injustices and oppression in our social system and to fight them in my own humble way, my poetry is a constant companion on the path of people’s revolution. The form is only a tool, of course with all the avenues of experimentation. I believe that genuine poetry wherever written becomes the inner voice of human essence.”

Nikhileswar

The eroding thin line between
The violence and non-violence
Where this soil longs for a greener life
Often pushed towards the ‘Last Supper’!
The terrorism now breathing through
the polities of murders and suicides
Stalks all around
Imposing a final question
Over our existence!

‘Pratikara Pratihimsa’

Tr. from Telugu by the Poet



SHAHRYAR

The Gates of Dreams are barred

THE night
has assigned a new anchorage
to me today :

It plucked
sleep from my eyes
and filled them with tears.
Then it whispered in my ears:
“I am absolving you
of every crime
and setting you free for ever.
Go wherever you like
Stay awake or sleep
But the gates of dreams
are barred to you.”

‘Khwab ka Dar Band Hai’

POEMS OF TODAY

"I want to create such a universe in my poetry which, of its own independent existence, can parallel the factual world and also reflect such values without which life would be inconceivable. This is a difficult task. I am in search of a medium and diction through which I may achieve this. As for subject-matter, I have not put any restrictions on myself. Nevertheless, I believe that to try to convey through poetry whatever can be said in prose—effectively through good prose—is a futile effort. Similarly, to demand any kind of social reference from poetry is also misleading. And this has damaged Urdu poetry enough, because whatever is created at the level of art is not verifiable at the level of material phenomenon. This is a mistake of literary criticism which cannot be ignored.

"Furthermore, poetry should not be evaluated by the same standards and principles as are applicable to fictional genres. I wish these mistakes of the past are not repeated. As long as there is scope for madness in life, there will also be the need for poetry, and this is my belief."

Shahryar

*Note tr. from Urdu
by Gopi Chand Narang*

Still Life

FLOWERS leaves stems
lips hands eyes

Wave of blood heart sound
moonlight sun

All these are frozen

In the bow of time
there is not a single arrow.

Short Stories



Stallion of the Sun

U.R. ANANTHA MURTHY

I AM writing this about Simpleton Venkata—Venkatakrishna Joysa is his real name—whom I had not seen in fourteen years. He had turned up before me in the market-place that day. He didn't recognize me because I had left the town a long time ago. But how could I ever forget my boyhood friend, this Venkata with *kumkum* smeared between his eyebrows, the front-half of his head shaved in a crescent shape, his gap-toothed mouth that grinned in a broad smile? With a burlap bag tucked under his arm, he stood gazing at the vegetable-stall like a boy in front of a toy-shop. His eyes, which were scanning the mounds of *tondekaayi*, *alasande*-peas and the banana bunches that hung from the ceiling, shifted the next moment to the cross-eyed Konkani shopkeeper who was watching him with the same indifference with which he watched the vagrant cattle in the street. I stood there eyeing him as though I had found a stream of cool water on a sweltering day. He too looked at me briefly, but it was a blank look. We were the only two in that market-place who were not carrying umbrellas. While all others were playing it safe, he, the professional astrologer that he was, was probably flaunting his ability to forecast the weather by showing that although it was the month of July, it wasn't going to rain that day. As for myself, I was someone who had left the place long ago to live in the city and had been to foreign countries;

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and so, now seeing me in my city attire, no one was going to be surprised that I didn't carry an umbrella. Venkata, on the other hand, for all appearances unprepared for the downpour, stood there smiling to himself in his secret knowledge, as it were, of the atmospheric phenomena, and looked at the vegetables that had come to the market from the neighbouring districts as if none of them was really edible. Oh, the thrill that I felt on seeing Simpleton Venkata! Would it have ebbed away if he hadn't recognized me? I wonder. Memories tend to dry up if they are not nurtured.

Though older than me by at least five or six years, this Venkata had been my closest friend when we were growing up. With him around, one's body and mind were at ease. Suddenly, an incident comes to mind: I must have been eight or nine years old then. I used to be quite afraid of the water. Once, he made me go with him to the river without telling my mother. Not heeding my screams and protests, clasping me tight to himself, he jumped from a boulder into the stream. Frightened at first, gasping for breath and swallowing water but still in his firm clasp, I felt myself gradually able to come up and go down into the water, to open my eyes in the water. Being tickled by the tiny fish, elated that I was learning to swim at last, I slowly began to feel comfortable in the water. First neck, then mouth, then nose, then head, I plunged deeper and deeper only to be buoyed up again by the water. Then coming out of the cool water to lie down in the warm sand and dry under the sun . . . The river in our village is probably all dried up now. As if about to jump into the water, I stood there before Venkata on tiptoes and said, "Hello there!"

"Can you believe the price of cucumbers these days, gentleman?"

I didn't budge. Staring into his eyes, I tried to laugh.

"Sir, what do you think I have under my arm? A fighting cock?" he said showing his toothless gums.

"Sure, Budan Saab. But how is it that your cock's comb is drooping like a Brahman's empty sack of alms?"

STALLION OF THE SUN

“No. This is the cock that got beaten up by my cock in the fight.” He held his shopping bag up to me as if he were holding up the cock by its legs.

“What misfortune has brought thee, O Prince, toothless and dishevelled, clutching this cock under thine arm, thus wandering to this strange land on this day of the full moon?”

Recognizing my theatrical speech in the manner of the Yakshagana plays we used to frequent together, a baffled Venkata paced a few steps backward, when his buttock scraped against the horn of an old cow that was chewing on a banana peel.

“Is it Ananthu?” he said, rubbing his buttock. Then turning back to the cow which was looking for more banana peels in the roadside gutter, he said:

“Pray, tell me, blessed cow, why did you cause me to fear that this Ananthu might be an amaldar or some such big officer? Or, are you my everhaunting sorcerer playing one of your tricks on me?”

The cow had picked up the banana peel from the gutter and was now blissfully chewing with its contorted mouth.

“How much *tondekaayi* shall I give you?” the cross-eyed Konkani shop-keeper asked me. I took the bag from Venkata and had it filled up with *tonde*, cucumber, *alasande*-peas, potatoes and onions, and said to Venkata, “Come on, let’s go to your house.”

“Yes, yes. Come with me. I will give you such an oil massage bath that you will see the moonlight. We have hot water ready in the bath-house, anyhow.” With the purposeful stride of one who is heading home after having purchased the provisions needed for a feast, Venkata walked briskly past the people in the street.

“Let me buy the Bhringamalaka oil then,” I said. We went up the steps to Prabhu’s shop which smelled of tobacco leaves.

“Visiting your home-town after a long time, aren’t you, Mr Murthy? Your brothers still buy on credit from us, just like in your father’s time. Come in, come in. Shall I get you something to drink?” said Prabhu who sat there with a pencil tucked

INDIAN LITERATURE

behind his ear and showed me a stool to sit on among the bins of provisions.

"I come here for a visit now and then. But I come to the market-place very rarely. Is everything well with you?" I said. The sweet smell of the jaggery Prabhu was weighing had blended with the pungency of the tobacco leaves.

"How can things be well? There have been no rains. Customers who bought on credit don't pay me back. Last year my eldest son fell ill and died within three days. Not a paisa of profit can be made in this trade; but you go on doing it because that is what your father taught you to do. My sons were not lucky like you to be able to go to England for study. They just settled down to the family business, trading in tobacco leaves and horse-gram. See that one? He is the second son. Over there is the fourth. The other two have opened a cloth shop. I married all my three daughters to lawyers. My eldest son's children are in high school now. How many children have you got now? Where do you live?" He talked on, placing the blocks of jaggery on the scale and all the time trying to keep the flies off. The conversation was familiar.

"We live in Mysore. I have two children—a boy and a girl. Have you got Bhringamalaka oil?"

"Oh! Is this for the oil-massage bath of our Venkata Joysa? After all, isn't he the one who did the massage-bath for K. T. Bhashyam when they were in jail together? So many cabinet ministers are known to him, all old-timers. There is hardly an important person in the whole of Karnataka who has not had himself massaged by Venkata Joysa. Yet, God only knows why he has not received his pension for the last two years. By the way, Joysre, why don't you have our Murthy put in a word for you? At least that way, if you get your pension we may get back some of the money you owe us. On the whole, like me this Joysa here is down on his luck. To all appearances, he too has a son. What a scoundrel he has turned out to be! Dropped out of school! As if that isn't enough, he frequents coffee-shops. Whatever you may say, our times were far better. Everything is up-

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side down nowadays."

Venkata grinned broadly and put down the shopping bag, took some snuff out of his pocket and tucked a pinch of it into his nostril. Taking the grimy bottle from the shop-boy, he said, "It's the B. V. Pandit brand oil, isn't it? Only that oil has the best cooling effect."

"Yes, of course, Joysre. The oil is quite fresh, too. I am the only stale thing in this shop," said Prabhu taking the money from me. "You are the first customer in the whole day to pay cash. That is how bad things are for us."

Venkata reached out for Prabhu's hand across the bins and holding it in his own, he meditated.

"The moment I saw you, Prabhu, I thought to myself that you looked tired. What you need is an oil massage. It's all settled. I'll be back tomorrow and massage some oil on your head, all right?"

With his hand still in Venkata's, Prabhu heaved a sigh and said, "Do you know, Mr Murthy, there isn't a single head in this town which hasn't received an oil rub at the hands of this Joysa? God only knows how such a good man got such a son. It seems the other day the boy beat up and robbed none other than the principal of the college."

Venkata laughed and drew a line across his forehead as if to indicate the writing of fate there. Prabhu made a similar gesture in agreement with him and, wiping the jaggery off his hands, said, "Do you think, Joysre, that he will be sent to jail?"

Venkata said, picking up the shopping bag and getting ready to leave, "Whatever fate has written on his forehead will happen. I got him released on bail. Gave a fine oil-massage bath to the police inspector and one to the principal. Now I've got to give a massage to the judge..."

Venkata's laughter made me uneasy. But Prabhu didn't seem to mind. Same old Venkata, always the laughing-stock of the town! No shame whatever!

We were walking in the direction of Kerekoppa village. The path was just a trail, unchanged in all these years. I began to

feel a seething rage against Venkata. He has been like this always, an imbecile. Once, during the Quit India Movement, this genius got us in trouble. We were in high school then. One day, he woke us up in the middle of the night and said, "Let's go and steal the mail box." It was pitch-dark on that night of the new moon. We carried the mail-box in the darkness to the bank of the river and buried it in the sand. Next day there was commotion all over the town. Putting on an air of innocence, we marched in the protest parade with everyone else, shouted slogans, hailed the national leaders, "Victory to Mahatma Gandhi! Victory to Kamala Devi!", picketed in front of the toddy-shop, laid ourselves down on the school ground—all this under the leadership of Venkata. But he loved to babble. On the street, someone, an out-of-towner, stopped him, it seems, to enquire where he could get a good cup of coffee. The ever-helpful Venkata took him to Sheenappayya's coffee-shop. What the fool didn't know was that the man was a secret agent of the C.I.D. "What you boys are doing is hardly anything. Do you know what all the havoc the students in Shivamogga are causing?" that sneaky C.I.D. egged him on, as he sipped his steaming coffee. Venkata loosened his tongue, "The Shivamogga students aren't the only ones, you know." "Come on. You boys here don't have the pluck to take on the government," teased the C.I.D. Venkata then bragged to the stranger about our adventure of the previous night. The result : the police double-marched us along with Venkata to the river-bank.

What happens then? The entire town gathers on the river-bank. The police hand us the spades and yell, "You widows' sons, start digging now!" After digging endlessly in that hot sun, we at last pull the mail-box out of the sand, and, in front of everyone, are made to carry it back to the post office ourselves. The police are not finished with us yet. Next, they take us in their truck and dump us in the Sakre Bayalu forest. We drag ourselves back eating wild berries or whatever else we can find on the way and trudge back to the town the following day, all fagged out.

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Despite my rage, remembering these events made me laugh. Venkata joined me in the laughter, having put the bag down, clapping and dancing all the while. "You are a good-for-nothing, stupid fool, you know," I told him. Although he was older, he had become my classmate having repeatedly failed his classes. Already at that time he had a wife—a veritable shrew. Sometimes, on his way to school he had to bring her along to attend this or that auspicious ceremony at someone's house. Then when they got to the market-place, he would walk fast in the street leaving her several paces behind as though she were a stranger to him, she all the while hopping to catch up with him. That is how we knew that he had a wife already when we were in Lower Secondary school. Once, when our arithmetic teacher was shouting abuse at him and thrashing him with a cane, Venkata tried to shield himself with a book, pleading, "Please, sir, I'm a married man! Don't hit me!" This made the teacher laugh so much that he took off his turban and started wiping the sweat off his face with his chalk-smeared hand. The grotesque look of the teacher's dark face, now all smeared with chalk powder, set us laughing. Then Venkata picked up the duster and started wiping the teacher's face with it. This made us laugh all the more. When the teacher turned to hit him again, he had crawled under the desk and was pleading with joined hands, "I don't want my wife to see cane-marks on my body; please don't hit me!" The teacher, who had rheumatism, couldn't bend down and so contented himself with kicking Venkata on the buttocks and shouting more abuse.

Even now, Venkata was making me laugh as though to prove that it was impossible for anyone to be angry with him. Still, thinking how he had allowed that son of his to grow up to be so irresponsible, I began to scold him harshly, "You are an escapist, an imbecile, a spineless ninny!"

"All this raging and fuming, where does it get you? Come, I'll massage away all your rage." Like a boy who has something to show you, he quickened his pace.

"Wait for me," I said to him. I wanted to tell him: 'I have

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treated you with indifference. I didn't try to see you on my previous visits. Today I have run into you by chance and so you are being playful with me. This is a game, I know, which will come to an end sooner or later. I think this buffoonery has become a habit with you. Lately, I feel I am drying up. I don't fancy anything. A vague apprehension troubles me. No idea for writing comes to me. I mouth grandiloquent words, and the pliant heads before me nod appreciatively. When this drama is over, only emptiness is left. Why don't I see things? Do you see things or do you only pretend to see? This self-effacement of yours is a pose, isn't it? Or, have I perhaps become an empty vessel by trying to write about lofty matters rather than about you whom I have known intimately ever since childhood?"

"I smell *kedige* flowers," Venkata said and, like the cannibal Rakshasa of mythology on detecting the presence of human beings, he started sniffing around with nostrils dilated. All this while, I had said nothing of my thoughts to him. He put the bag down and disappeared into the *kedige* shrubbery saying, "My daughter, Ganga, is very fond of wearing *kedige* flower in her hair." I didn't know that *kedige* was in season then. "Damn these *kedige* flowers. Don't know where the devil they are hiding," Venkata said, emerging after some time empty-handed. "Come, let's go."

On the way we met a man who wore gold studs in his ears. He carried a bundle of clothes on his head. Spitting out saliva mixed with betel juice, he said, "Ha! Joysa! I just came past your house. Your wife stopped me and began to curse you profusely. She said you left home this morning to go to the market and hadn't returned. She called you all sorts of names. . . ."

Venkata helped the man bring the load down from his head and asked, "When you talked to her, was she in the backyard or the frontyard? Pray, tell me, O Learned One, in what quarter of our abode did my good wife receive thee?"

The man was amused by this theatricality. He spat out the rest of the betel juice, wiped his mouth with the edge of his dhoti, and revealing his few reddened teeth, he asked, "Why? It

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Drawing : Jai Zharotia

was in the backyard."

"Then it means she will have made the *palya* dish out of the *chogate-soppu* that grows in our backyard. My wife is a culinary wizard who can turn even cattle feed into a savory dish. We are grateful to the Learned One for the good tidings."

The man, who had started on his way, stopped and turned round. "But she has a foul mouth," he said. "By the way, Joysa, why is your son Subba so mean and ill-tempered? I try to make some conversation with him and he tells me to mind my own

business. I was about to tell the grumpy boy to go to hell, but not being the one to meddle in others' affairs, I just kept quiet. People like you and me, trying to be helpful, show concern for one another; but that son of yours wants to be different. That's what happens to these boys who go to college."

Balancing the load on his head with one hand and swinging the other, the celestial messenger departed. "How right you are!" said Venkata to him and, joining me, started walking with his goose-step as if nothing had happened. What a chap! I marvelled. I was now convinced that Venkata had made a mess of all his affairs. Yet, look at the way he goes about, unconcernedly! Is he a hardened wretch, or a perfect phony, or a shabby-looking saint? I wondered.

"How many children do you have now?" I asked.

"Four. Our first-born is our only male progeny. The daughters are all still unmarried. And so my wife, in addition to being the fierce goddess Chamundi that she already was, has now turned into the fire-spitting Kali. In any case, I am a devotee of Kali, and so, even her wrath is a blessing on me. Thus have I managed to remain blissful in this earthly existence."

His theatrical speech was beginning to irritate me. Why should men like Venkata father children, live a life of humiliation at the hands of every passer-by? When Marx talked about the idiocy of the village-life, no doubt he had men like Venkata in mind, I said to myself. Venkata appeared to me to typify all those who live a life of supreme passivity. If I had been among my friends in the city, I would probably have expressed my concern with a statement such as, "Oh, will this country of ours ever change?" Here, with Venkata, I tried to urge my views as earnestly as I could. But would he listen to anyone?

"It hasn't rained at all... It will be a miracle if the mango blossoms appear this season. Last year there wasn't a single pickling mango... You see that tree over there? Sometimes hundreds of parrots come and settle on that tree... The hill over there is called Peacock Hill. There is a cave there. Once my children are all married, I'll go and live in that cave. The view

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from that cave is simply breathtaking. I'll just authorize my wife to receive my pension, and then I'll go and live there."

And so he went on and on while I was carrying my own discourse with him:

'What is politics but a change in the way we live? . . . But change toward what? Toward the haves, or the have-nots? Why is passion essential for such a change? . . . At the basis of all politics, of all science, for that matter, is passion for changing the nature of things and of people into sharing your hopes and aspirations. It is at the basis of religious activities, too, for religion is the politics of the everlasting. . . . Don't you wish your wife and children would also pursue what you have considered to be the right path? To wish for the status-quo is also politics. . . . Do you know why? Change is in the nature of things. Some try to prevent change for their own ends, but cannot do so for long. . . . All things expand, all things explode. Nothing remains the same. That is why we should constantly strive for an order that we think is right.'

And like that, I went on talking.

"Everything is what it is because that's what one is born with," so saying, Venkata put the bag down, turned his face up to the sky and brought his palms together as if to pray.

"I bow to heroes like you. But you must not mind an imbecile like this Venkata. Besides, when you heroes get your head all heated up, you need people like me to give you a cooling massage," he said and began tapping with his fingers on the imaginary head before him.

"Go to hell!" I said in disgust. Venkata saw that I was really angry.

"Look here, Ananthu. Far from changing the world, I can't even change the woman I married. Today I am alive. But tell me, is there any guarantee that tomorrow I'll still be living?"

We came to a spot where we had to cross a ford over a narrow make-shift bridge fashioned out of the trunks of three areca palms.

"After you. But be careful!" Venkata waited for me to cross

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first. I walked over the bridge gingerly and then waited for him on the other side of the ford. Satisfied that I had at last engaged him in my discourse, I said:

“We may die tomorrow or we may not. In any case, there will be others who live. . .”

I insisted that he let me carry the bag now. We were walking along the paddy-field.

“Do you know, Ananthu, that the grove we were in just before crossing the bridge is inhabited by a Panjurli spirit? The Panjurli is known for its short temper. Once, a long time ago, I was walking in the grove singing to myself. It was getting dark. At my back, I heard the rustle of dry leaves. I turned around to see. Can you guess what it was? A tiger! I passed out. When I came to, I saw that I had wet my dhoti.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Oh, no particular reason. Look Ananthu, I am a big coward. I don’t know what to say when you talk like this as though you were possessed by a Panjurli spirit. I tell my wife, ‘This is the way I am. What can I do?’ She may have a foul mouth, but she is a good person. If I say I have a stomachache or something, she will walk miles to bring this or that herb and brew a decoction for me. . . I got scared when I saw that tiger. Do you know why? Because I don’t know how to bring around a tiger and pacify it with an oil-massage. If I knew, I would grab it by its whiskers and beginning with its forehead, I would gently massage. . .”

Venkata started laughing hysterically. Remembering the school-days when he used to get beatings, I too started laughing. But the suspicion that all his unsaid thoughts were contained in his laughter and that I was being ridiculed by his laughter made me uneasy.

“You idiot! Is it possible for anyone to live without an ego? Even the gentlest of beings needs to have an ego,” I said. Then, I began to feel that without destroying Venkata and his likes there is no progress, no electricity, no river-dams, no penicillin, no pride, no honour, no passionate love-making, no satisfying a

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woman, no climax, no flying, no joy of life, no memory, no ecstasy, no bliss. Absorbed in such thoughts, I looked at Venkata as he stood on the edge of the paddy-field, barefoot and bubbling with bliss. I was confused. Was it out of pity for me that he was laughing? I wasn't sure.

"You say that your grown-up daughters are still unmarried. What if they go astray?" I asked. I was trying to hurt this Venkata who could be so kind to me.

"I would be so grateful to you if you could find husbands for them yourself. Where do I have the money for their dowry? They are precious gems, those girls. Why would they go astray? Still, if they do, it is their fate. Who am I to avert it?"

Faced with his disarming honesty, I was at a loss for words. What should I say to him? That he should go and make money? Somehow revolutionize society? Smiling, but without the playfulness, Venkata said: "Look. After all, I'm a priest by profession. My nature is to worship, worship whatever I see. If I come upon some heads, I worship, I worship the Panjurli, ghosts, and sundry spirits; I worship the school-inspector, the police sub-inspector, the amaldar, now you, and Bhashyam in the old days. That is my way of worshipping the Mother Goddess, by worshipping anything and everything. What do you get by butting heads with your adversary? A swollen head. The Mother Goddess has looked after me so far: My wife Rukku makes cups out of banana leaves. I carry them on my head to the market and sell them. Soon, I'll be getting my pension back. The other day I gave our M.L.A. a superb oil-massage. I was telling him how in jail I used to make K.T. Bhashyam see the moonlight with my massage... See how these trees and plants embody god within them? Likewise, we too should embody god within ourselves. But, probably, there is still some residual bitterness in me. Or else, my son Subba wouldn't be so hot-headed."

Venkata snatched the bag from my hand so that I could walk more freely, and he began to point out the birds of his liking to me.

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“Look at those birds. They don’t even care whether they are looked at by us. They want neither your social change nor my oil-massage. They drop their excrement on the heads of even the fiercest spirits and then fly away. To live, they have to be neither imbeciles nor dare-devils. Don’t you think so, Ananthu?”

I walked briskly, for I was getting hungry. At my back, Venkata mimicked my gait, the way he used to mimic me when we were in school. Do I still hobble the way I used to? — I wondered and felt awkward.

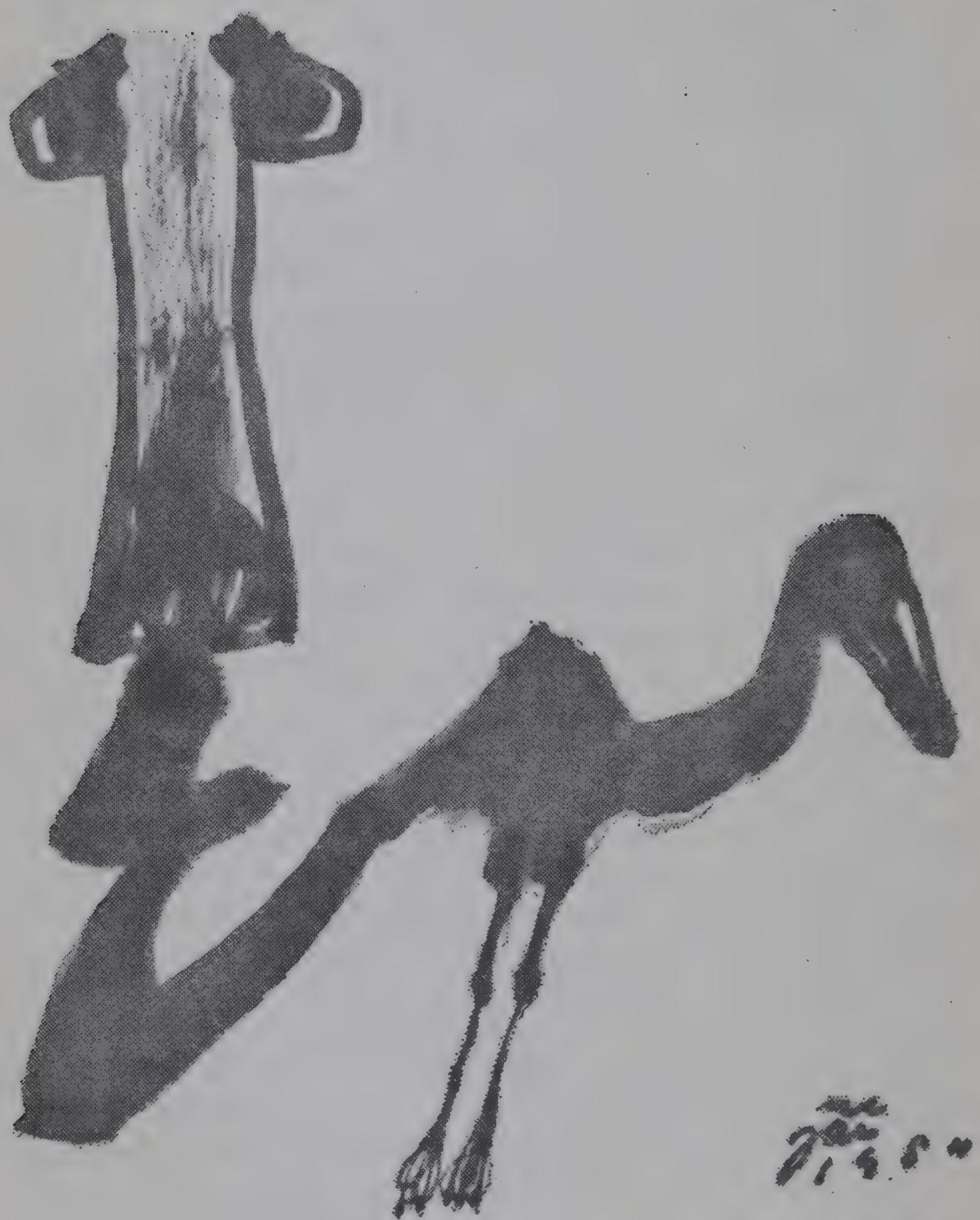
Here and there, villagers sat idly, looking anxious because the rains had not come. “Joysre, when are the rains going to come?” someone would ask sluggishly, to whom Venkata would reply with mock seriousness, “Just wait one more week.” “There aren’t even the leaves for you to make those cups. Are all your astrology and magic-spells just mumbo jumbo then?” asked a young man in trousers with barely concealed sarcasm. “Lately, we’ve been making cups from the *muttuga* leaves from the woods. We have to eke out a living somehow, don’t we?” replied Venkata calmly. “Lo, Chikka. It seems a cow belonging to your master had been missing. He came to me to have a charm made. Did the cow come home?” he enquired of a cowherd. “Yes, it did,” said the boy who was playing with some pebbles, without looking up. I thought that this must be the daily routine of Venkata. It was the life of a simpleton, open for everyone to see, neither flourishing nor withering; he laughs and makes others laugh, dreams of living by himself in the cave on the Peacock Hill, always gives in to others, gets abused by his wife. The king cobra which has the jewel in its hood also has venom in its fangs. No such fangs in this Venkata. No passion, no fury, no envy in him.

Venkata pointed out to me a huge tree, enormous in girth. “There is something unusual about this tree. Look, how one of its limbs shaped like a hand is pointing to the ground. They say that is because a treasure is buried under the ground,” he said. I laughed. “A few greedy folks have even tried to dig up the

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treasure. But how can anyone get it? It belongs to a Jettiga spirit that inhabits the tree." I was amazed by his intimate knowledge of his surroundings. He, this boyhood friend of mine, could expatiate on the legends concerning every square foot of this place. Nurtured by the myriad ghosts and spirits of the land, a philosophy of his own had evolved.

This is how I came to know about it: All the while as he led me expertly through the maze of those paths in the woods, he was narrating the legends that would somehow link those hidden paths we were treading to the mythological past. "Once Mother Sita . . ." and so he would begin an episode in the *Ramayana* when Rama and Sita lived a life of hardship in the forest and then show me a gummy leaf which, he said, Sita used for the wick of her oil-lamp. The orchid on the tree in front of us was the flower Rama had brought for Sita to wear in her hair. The rock over there was the rock which Lakshmana pierced with his arrow to release a fountain of water. Pointing to a hollow formed in the rock, Venkata challenged me, "Let me see you scoop up the water from that hollow with your palms." I tried, but as I scooped, more water kept filling up the hollow. He asked me to drink the water. I did. The water tasted cool and sweet. "This is the water with which Shri Rama bathed this linga idol here," he told me, pointing to a protrusion on the rock and poured on it the water he scooped up from the hollow. Then, with his eyes closed and kneeling down like the bull at Shiva's temple, he muttered words to the following effect: "Some people look upon the Supreme God as their mother, some as their father. Those for whom God is their mother have their eyes always on her breast, full and overflowing with milk. They suck at it and don't want to let it go. They don't want anyone else's breast, either. Those for whom God is their father, they look into the Lord's eyes and become intoxicated. They want to see everything, they want to drink up the whole world through their eyes and yet their thirst for 'seeing' remains unquenched. The child who is sucking at the breast sometimes falls asleep sucking; wakes up, and sucks again. I am the sucking type. You are the seeing



Drawing : Jai Zharotia

type. . . Why did the sage Shankara, who set to comprehend the universe through seeing, suddenly desire to taste it like a suckling baby?—I wonder. You don't have to comprehend something in order to soak it up. The earth-worm soaks it up; the tree soaks it up. They live and they flourish. . . Maybe, if the Mother Goddess herself separates you from her breast and puts you down because you have drunk enough, you may perchance open your eyes and see. But it is all at the whim of the Mother Goddess. Sometimes she may even pull you away from one breast and set you to the other. It is a frightening moment, though! Passing from one breast to the other, from life to death, some fortunate souls may even glimpse her eyes, if they don't scream with fright. . . All that grand heroism is not for me. It is as the fool that the likes of me serve this world. Now, you would like to suck at the breast, too. It is only natural. You too fall asleep while sucking. You too kick the mother while sucking. Besides, before you ride off on your heroic mission of making the world bend toward your path, don't you sometimes need cool nourishment from the Mother Goddess's milk, from my oil-massage which I am going to give you? . . .”

Having spoken like the learned sage in the Bhagavata-drama, Venkata was entranced by his own eloquence. He stood there and inhaled a pinch of snuff. “After giving up *beedi*-smoking, I took to this snuff,” he said. “Wait till my wife sees you with me; her foul mouth will be sealed up instantly.” Gloating over the prospect, he scampered on. Because of his knock-knees, he walked rather clumsily.

In front of us there was a house, an unwhitewashed, unswept, dilapidated house. “This is Sheshanna's house. He's very ill. Let's go in and take a look at him,” Venkata said, and, leaving the hand-bag by the front door, led me inside to a dark veranda. “This is Ananthu, Achar's son. He is a professor in Mysore. You know him, don't you?” he said. Adjusting my eyes to the darkness and still musing over Venkata's words, I said to myself: Look at this Venkata; he is a philosopher, too. If I try to answer him, I'll have to use words and phrases in English; or

else, translate them into expressions unfamiliar to him. Somewhat like these: The frivolous insensitivity to suffering. . . the stoic resignation of a coward. . . unauthentic being. . . escapism. . . complacency born out of superstition. . . innocence of the village idiot. . . , and so on. . .

If he read what I have written about him, he would read it only as he knows himself to be. Simpleton that he is, he is untouched by irony. The constant whirling of the world, the flux, and the changes have no meaning to the one who has no desire of his own. Before such non-political being, all my knowledge is futile. He is the direct antithesis of Kissinger. Even Gandhi desired change and so, was involved. . . . Wait a minute! This Venkata, who came to me as a story, is developing into an essay! I am finding myself confronted by that which to me in the beginning was only a subject for writing!

“This is Sheshanna. His son works in Bombay, where they make atom bombs. Smart, just like you. My son also wants to become like him. Has married a white woman. She visited here. In a sari, and with *kumkum* on her forehead, she looks like the Mother Goddess, Kali. She asked her father-in-law to go and live with them. But how can this man go? He cannot live without his potato and onion *huli*. Besides, he likes to lord it over the family. Why would a son who is educated put up with it?” Venkata chattered on as he chopped the betel-nut into fine pieces.

Sheshanna started coughing. He coughed as though he was going to run out of breath. Venkata lifted him, sat him up against himself and, patting his back, held a bowl to his mouth. I thought his last moment had come. With his head thrown back and coughing incessantly, he was gasping for breath. Proping his head up, Venkata coaxed him to spit. Sheshanna must have spat blood. Venkata laid him down on the bed and went to the backyard to empty the bowl. “I’ll make you some coffee,” he said when he came back and went into the kitchen. Sheshanna was panting heavily with his mouth wide open, his eyes fluttering. In the dim light that came through a glass tile in

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the roof, I sat there crouched, counting the gourds that hung from the ceiling-beams. On a rickety cot in the corner, covered in a thin blanket, Sheshanna lay like a corpse. He must have been in the advanced stages of tuberculosis. Most probably Venkata himself is nursing him. That is how Venkata has always been, at the service of others. On our way back from school, if you looked in his school-bag, you would find there medicine-bottles for all sorts of people, vials in which to bring snuff for the women who had become secret snuff-users, ribbons for young girls, double-edged licing combs, silk threads for the Anantha-worship, decoration tinsels for the Gouri festival, sugar-candies from the Mussulman's sweetshop for the sundry children—anything and everything, except the school-books. Along with his own umbrella, he would be carrying two more tattered ones for repair. His clothes showing patches, a basil leaf in his tuft of hair, he sauntered along the market-street as though he owned the place. He would sometimes bring us sour plums.

Venkata brought hot coffee from inside and helped She-shanna drink it. "God knows when my life is going to come to an end," he said and drank it in slurps as Venkata blew on the coffee and held the cup to his lips.

"Nonsense! You are not going to die so soon, take it from me. Suppose the Lord of Death were to come to your doorstep riding on his water-buffalo, you are the kind who is quite likely to ask him to wait until you have finished eating your delicious potato and onion *huli*. And if by chance he tasted it, then instead of taking you away with him he would let you stay right here on earth, so there would be a place on earth where he could go when he is in the mood for a good, tasty curry. However, it would be unlike the God of Death to return from his rounds empty-handed. So, not wishing to waste a trip, he would ask you to show him someone else to take your place to go with him. You would then send him to this buffoon Venkata who, though younger than you, having played out his buffoonery, is ready to go. Then, if the Lord of Death gets scared away

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by my wife's sharp tongue, I live. If not, I go."

Sheshanna's face perked up a little. Venkata set his head on the pillow and got up to leave. "I'll send you rice-gruel mixed with lentil water; my daughter will bring it to you," he said and motioned me to get up

"Your friend might know my son, Dr. Subrahmanya Shastri. He studied in London and is now an engineer in Bombay, at the place where they make the atom bombs. They say he gets three thousand rupees monthly. Lives in a spacious bungalow," said Sheshanna, trying to sit up. Venkata made him lie down and told him to go to sleep. Taking leave of him, I came out of the house.

Keeping me a few paces ahead of him, Venkata opened the fence-gate. "Come and see whom I have brought with me," he called out to his wife flaunting me as his shield against her. On seeing me, Rukku, who came out fuming, cooled down like a burning log being doused. Wiping her wet hands with the edge of her sari, she now beamed at me. "Ananthu here insisted on bringing these for you, he wouldn't listen to me," Venkata said, handing her the bag filled with vegetables. The wrinkles on her face etched by a thousand hardships now eased up in a smile of gratitude.

A broad stripe of *kumkum* across her forehead, a *champak* flower tucked in her greying hair, eyes reddened by the kitchen smoke, Rukku looked mere skin and bone. Next, Shakuntala, Gouri, and Ganga appeared. The older girls, who had come of age, wore saris, and had their hair braided neatly. Glass bangles, plain ear-studs, fresh, fragrant *champak* in their hair—that was all their adornment. One girl bashfully brought warm water for me to wash; the other brought a small towel. The youngest, who wore a skirt with patches on it, peeked at me from behind her mother. She had in her hand a garland of jasmine flowers which she had been stringing. Outside, while washing my feet, I looked around: There were flowers which I hadn't seen in years.

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Many kinds of jasmine, roses, chrysanthemums, shoe-flower, *tumbe*, *parijata*, *champak*, shell-flower, the peacock's pride—it was a lush and water-soaked garden. The water in the well was still plentiful even though the rains hadn't come.

The house, too, was very orderly. The earthen floor had been polished to show a shiny dark colour. On it were *rangoli*-patterns made of white flour. White-washed walls, gourds hung from the ceiling-beams. An almanac hung by a nail in the wall. Venkata removed his shirt and hung it on another nail. In a corner was a neat pile of rolled-up mattresses. From the upper sill of the door hung a lattice work made of pieces of glass bangles and a decoration in cotton, probably from the last Gouri festival. The copper pitcher I was given for washing my feet was brightly polished. Shakuntala brought me a brass cup filled with a cool drink made out of a mixture of rice-water, milk, jaggery and cardamom seeds. "I have two children, too," I said. "Is everyone well at home?" Rukku enquired. She and Venkata started arguing excitedly as they paced back and forth to the kitchen. He wanted to give me his oil-massage and hot bath right then. She argued that I should bathe and eat first and later at night should get my massage and hot bath. She won in the end. Venkata followed me to the bath-house.

"Because you have come, I didn't get my usual dressing-down," he said. I laughed and started pouring hot water on myself. In the room there was a granite-stone tub for the hot bath after the oil-massage. Next to it were cauldrons for hot water, a pot filled with cooling *matti* leaves, and canisters of soap-nut powder. Looking at Venkata's paraphernalia, I became somewhat apprehensive about the evening.

"Why do you make your wife angry?" I asked.

"Why would I make her angry? She gets angry. It is the weapon that the Mother Goddess has granted her in order to protect me. You see, somehow this idiot has to be kept under control, the children have to be attended to, firewood in the house has to be kept dry. If there was no nagging at home, I would probably just go on chattering with whomever I run into

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and forgot to come home. She has to be abusive to scare off all those who take this gullible fool for a ride," spoke Venkata as he kept pushing the burning logs into the kiln.

"Where is your son? I don't see him," I asked.

"He spends most of the time playing cards with his cronies. None of these weapons of mine works on him. If he sees me he flies into a rage."

The futility of your philosophy is confronting you in the person of your son, I wanted to tell him but didn't. But I looked at him in an accusing way. He went on talking as if none of it made any sense to him:

"He is infuriated that his father doesn't command any respect. But how can I change what I am? The principal of his college didn't allow him to sit for the examinations because he didn't attend classes regularly. Do you know what he did? At night, he attacked the principal. They say he even robbed him of his money. He pesters me to give him money to start a flour mill in the town. I am down and out. Where am I supposed to come up with the money he wants?"

'You poor wretch! You don't understand evil at all, do you? You are like the lotus flower that blossoms only in stagnant water! I don't think I can put up with you even for two days. Stoic that you are, the changing times are not for you. You will go on living like this, scratching when it itches, wallowing in complacency, for ever playing the fool'—I held myself back from speaking out my thoughts and, feeling affection and disgust for Venkata, I finished my bath. After me, Venkata bathed ritually, chanting the prayer-hymns. The water he poured on himself was made to flow out on a bed of *kesuvu* leaves that grew profusely. Seeing me eyeing the *kesuvu* leaves, he said, "I'll ask her to make the *patrode* dish from these leaves for the evening."

For my lunch, Shakuntala had placed a floor-board for me to sit on and, in front of it, the end part of a flame-dried banana leaf, having circled it with a rangoli decoration on the floor. On the leaf were a variety of mouth-watering pickles, *happalas* made

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from jack-fruit, pungent fries the names of which I was too shy to ask, and rice *payasa* in the corner.

“Not much of a lunch; everything was done in a hurry,” said Rukku apologetically and served me dish after dish. There were two kinds of *tambulis* to go with the rice. There was, just as Venkata had guessed, *palya* made out of *chogate* leaves; diluted butter-milk garnished with fresh ginger and coriander; the *saru* made of water drained from boiling rice and mixed with sour butter-milk and then garnished with spices—I had forgotten its name and hadn’t had it since my childhood. Venkata ate everything with blissful relish. The meal was so savoury and light and yet quite filling.

Shakuntala and Gouri, competing with each other, had prepared a bed for me. Just as I was laying myself down for a nap, I heard Rukku calling out “Ay Subba, Subba, come and eat.” Half out of anxiety, half in helpless anger, she appealed to her husband, “For God’s sake, ask Subba to come and eat”

I came out with Venkata, but saw only the back of a person in shirt and pants, with shoulder-length hair in the style of the hippies. He was walking away briskly without looking back. His gait was just like his father’s. But he was taller than his father and lankier. Venkata, shirtless and just in his *dhoti*, ran after him. Subba stopped, turned round and shaking his hands menacingly, shouted some insult at his father. His body contorted, Venkata was cringing and pleading with him. Subba looked around suddenly and picked up a stone. Venkata began to back up shielding his face with his hands, still pleading. Subba then walked away briskly. I felt uneasy looking at Rukku who stood there helplessly in anguish for her son. Venkata came back, his face downcast. “Subba is all agitated. He was about to pounce on me like a tiger!” he said quivering in mock fear.

“Can’t you stop your clowning at least now? What kind of a father are you who couldn’t give his son a slap or two and bring him back?” said Rukku and went inside wiping her eyes. Venkata followed her into the house saying, “You go and eat. Set the things aside for Subba. When he feels hungry he will come home

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on his own." I went and lay down on the bed. The little girl Ganga was playing with cowrie-shells by herself.

Rukku was saying to her husband all that I could be saying to him myself, only more harshly: "Just because you don't mind rotting here in this place doesn't mean that your son, who is of this generation, would also like to rot here! Some father you are, a worthless nobody in the eyes of the people! You just settle down wherever you go and grin stupidly at people. What should the children look up to you for? Why should people like you have a family at all? God knows how many years it has been since your pension stopped coming. I have to manage everything myself—make banana cups, keep the house in order, attend to the children. I must prepare the special food freshly, three times a day, for that stingy Sheshanna. I send him soft-cooked rice and he says, 'Couldn't she have sent some mango pickle? Your mother is mighty closefisted.' As if it is not enough that I break my back here for my own household, I get criticism from this man. None of us, not even the children have stepped out of this wretched place even for a day. A country fair, or a cinema, or another town—what have we seen, tell me? That poor boy, Subba. I make his favourite *payasa* of rice and black gram, but he roams in the hot sun on an empty stomach like a mad dog. He has got so wicked as to strike his own father. I know, someone who doesn't like us has put an evil spell on him. You are so simple-minded that you don't understand evil things at all. . ." As the litany of abuse kept pouring down on him, I must have fallen asleep.

I don't know how long I slept. When I opened my eyes I sensed that Venkata was pacing about me with the bottle of Bhringamalaka oil in his hand. I sat up and looked at him enquiringly. With a mouth full of betel juice, he smiled and said, "Let's go." I got up and followed him to the bath-house. It was getting dark. He made me undress completely and wear a piece of cloth over my groin. A roaring fire was heating up the water. There were other cauldrons filled with cold water. He shut the bath-house door and made me sit on the wooden board. He was

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Drawing : Jai Zharotia

wearing a towel around his waist and had tucked it between his legs above the knees as if he was about to wade into a pond. Dipping the sacred grass in the oil and touching my forehead and the top of my head with it, he muttered the ritual chants. He spat out the betel-mixed saliva and, beginning with the feet, he applied oil all over my body. Then he sat me on a stool and placed my feet in a bowl of castor oil. "The coolness of the oil will gradually climb up until it is absorbed by your brain," he explained. In his cupped palms he scooped up the Bhringamalaka oil and poured it on my head. Chanting the names of the Mother Goddess, he rapped on my head with both hands as though he were beating a drum. "I am now talking to your

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head. Doesn't it sound like a *mrudanga*-drum?" he asked, varying the rhythm and the beat. "Yes," I said timidly. All that worship-like attention was making me uncomfortable. From the way he was beating the drum on my head, I suspected that he could even be dancing at my back. "From your head this rhythm will flow to your navel," he said. "The sound will raise the six coils of your Kundalini. Though I don't know much about such things, I know that it works," he said breathing rapidly. I was now certain that he was dancing. I thought of the *ghatam* player performing in a music concert.

The ritual that followed the drum-playing consisted of many rhythmic actions which were accompanied by a running commentary by Venkata in his soft, quivering voice. My backside had become warm because of the fire. He was circumambulating my head as if he were worshipping it. Tickling, pinching, plucking, pressing, patting, pulling, pushing and scratching, his agile fingers worked all around my head. "Now your head will talk to me on its own," he said wiping the sweat from his face and got ready for the second stage of the ritual oil-massage and the raising of the Kundalini. As I wondered whether the fingers he had in his hand were twenty or hundred, the voice of his running commentary was assuming the tone of an incantation, rhythmically rising and falling according to the need, thus:

Here we go, Ananthu, Ananthu, entering the woods, entering the woods. . . . In the woods there is a tree, a tree. . . . On the tree, a parrot, a parrot, a green parrot, a green parrot in the green leaves. In the hooked bill of the green parrot. . . . a red fruit, a red, red fruit in the hooked bill of the green parrot. . . .

Down there, a cool bower. . . . a cool, cool, cool bower. . . . the fragrant bower, fragrant with the yellow *kedige*. . . . Watch, watch. . . . watch how it's bursting. . . . Watch the rough, long, thorny-edged, green leaf. . . . Inside the green leaf, soft yellow. . . . smooth yellow, fragrant yellow, powdery yellow, slippery yellow, slinky yellow. . . . Walk on, walk softly, softly walk. . . . Watch, here is *basari*, here jack-fruit tree. . . . This is *nandi*. . . . This is *muttuga*. . . . This is mango. . . . This is *ranja*. . . . This is banyan. . . . Look at the roots

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that grow downwards from its branches to reach the ground. . . Look at the nail at the tip of the root, the roots that are the matted hair of the rishi. . .

The blue sky above. . . The wide open space below. . . Walk on. . .

Look at the little sapling. . . On the sapling, a leaf. . . On the leaf something springs. . . springs suddenly. . .

Remember that day on our way to school, how it sprang, the grasshopper? You dropped the books and stood there watching transfixed. . . watching. . . watching the sun's mount. . . a galloping stallion. You watched how the sun rode on its humped back. . . The mighty sun, sitting lightly on it, sitting invisibly on it, shimmering in a corner. . .

Look where the sun shimmers. . . Shimmers in its feelers. . . Shimmers in its green beak. . . Shimmers in the pupil of its eye. . . Shimmers from the cloud's edge. . . tumbles, slips, breaks into pieces. . . forms shadows, forms colours. . . sets, rises, burns. . .

See the wide open space, vast space. . . Above, the burning sun. Carrying him lightly on its back and hopping, all alone in the open field, is the sun's mount. . . See its saddleless swagger. . . its crooked legs. . . its stiff tail. . . its feelers feeling for the world. . . it is hopping from leaf to leaf. . . See the whole of it. . . See the parts of it. . . The eyes green. . . a heap of green. . . frothing green. . . Listen. . . Listen to the stallion of the sun. . .

I am no beast. You are no man. So, let one be the other.

Brother Ananthu. . . Hop on, Ananthu. . . Carry the sun on your back. . .

Be gone, gone. . . The fury gone. . . the frowning gone. . . the ego gone. . . the swagger gone. . . Greed for the gold, bragging of the birth – all gone. . .

Be gone, evil spell. . . Wicked spell. . . Father's spell. . . Mother's spell. . . Priest's spell. . . Layman's spell. . . Prostitute's spell. . . Paramour's spell. . . Spell of death. . . spell of vulva. . . spell of the street. . . spell of books. . . All spells, be gone.

The stallion of the sun is all that is left. You are the stallion. . . You are the stallion of the sun. . .

In this manner words poured forth in rhythmic accompaniment to the dance of his thousand fingers on my head. Venkata wiped off the oil flowing down to my eyes. He asked eagerly: "Ananthu, are you beginning to see the moonlight, yet?" I said, "Yes," not wishing to disappoint him. He was drench-

ed in perspiration. Sitting still there, naked before him, I became self-conscious.

"This time, you only got a glimpse. Wait till I give you my next oil-massage; you will see the real moonlight," he said inhaling the snuff.

I was wrong. This simpleton Venkata, too, is a scheming politician. What a manipulator! He was trying to change my very 'being'.

He made me sit in the tub filled with hot water and told me to rub myself under the arm-pits and between the legs. He poured the cool *matti* essence on my head and vigorously rubbed my head with soap-nut powder. Scooping up water in a pitcher, he poured it on me with force. The steam and the boiling water made my body flaming red. I was too weak to dry myself. He dried me, gave me a cool drink made of jaggery, smeared my forehead with some soot from the bottom of the boiler. Then bringing me into the house, made me lie down on the bed, covered me with all the blankets that were in the house and said, "You have to sweat it out." In a while I was all soaked as if I had taken the bath once again. He dried me again and laid me on the grassmat. He brought me steaming coffee. After drinking it I felt drowsy. In the kitchen, Rukku was crying and preparing *patrode*.

When I woke up, I heard Venkata pleading with his wife, "Please make some rice-gruel for Sheshanna. I'll take and feed it to him myself." "They say his son sends him five hundred rupees every month. But he doesn't pay you a single paisa. You don't care about your own son, yet you expect me to care about that miser. What is it to me whether he lives or dies?" Rukku screamed. Still, Venkata got Shakuntala to make some rice-gruel and took it to Sheshanna's house.

I had sat up in the bed now. Rukku came and stood before me and started to cry. According to her, Subba was under the influence of inauspicious stars. He wanted to go to Bangalore or Mysore to become a mechanic. Why shouldn't he also prosper like Sheshanna's son? He didn't lack brains. At least, as a favour

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to my childhood friend, I should take his son with me to Mysore and set him up there in some job.

I was afraid. If I took him home with me, my wife would not put up with his antics. Still I promised Rukku that I would do something for him. I'll get him a room on rent somewhere, I told myself. My assurance made Rukku so happy that it brightened up the whole house. When Venkata returned, he saw the changed mood of his household, and he too became exuberant. But he didn't know of the promise I had made his wife. As if he was doing a scene from a comic drama, he acted out a past instance of Sheshanna's stinginess, without showing the least bitterness for him: Venkata had just then bought some medicine for him. Again and again, Sheshanna counted the change Venkata had brought back. (Seeing Venkata mimic, Sheshanna's cough and counting the coins with shaky hands, even Rukku laughed.) When Sheshanna started counting once again, Venkata asked him, "Anything wrong?" "This quarter seems all worn off," says Sheshanna. "It's a good coin. It'll still pass," says Venkata. "But why take a chance? Go back and pass this off, and bring me another quarter, will you?" (Venkata begged in a phlegmatic voice just like Sheshanna's.) "Do you want me to go right now?" asks Venkata, having just walked three miles from the town. "Is there anything else you want done in the town that cannot wait till another day?" Sheshanna's ashen face showed supreme contentment. "I knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep. So, I gave him a different quarter I had with me," said Venkata and took out from his pocket the worn quarter he had been unable to pass off. "When he dies, throw it on his corpse," Rukku said angrily, got up and went inside to get the supper ready.

Since childhood, I was very fond of *patrode*. But, now something had happened which prevented me from eating Rukku's *patrode*. I couldn't help noticing that Rukku was crying uncontrollably while Shakuntala and Venkata were trying unsuccess-

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fully to console her. Soon I learned what had happened: She wants to serve me the *kheeru* in the silver cup. So, she goes to look for it in the brass trunk in which she kept all the things she had brought with her as dowry when she got married. When she opens the trunk, what does she find there? The *gorochana-dye* kept for the sake of grandchildren, some nutmeg, dried ginger, *kasturi* pills, a *rudrakshi*-berry, dried shell of pomegranate, a piece of sandalwood, soap-nut for washing the jewellery—everything else is gone. All those pieces of jewellery which, despite poverty, had been saved from being pawned away because Rukku had the foresight to put them away for the girls when they would get married—ear-rings, ear-chains, a four-stranded necklace, four bracelets, a waist-band, an ornament of floral design for the braid, a nose ring, a pair of anklets, a coral chain, two silver bowls, three silver cups, a silver cup used for offering worship, a silver pitcher, a silver spoon, silver boxes for *kumkum* and turmeric—everything that had been put away, wrapped in a piece of an old silk sari after the *Gouri* festival, has now vanished.

Venkata had been pressing me to eat the *patrode* pretending that nothing had happened, when Ganga, the youngest girl, came running and said anxiously:

“Mother is crying. Subba has stolen all jewellery. Everything was there when Mother opened the trunk on Friday to get the pomegranate shell to make medicine for your stomachache. You remember, the day before yesterday, Mother went to the river to wash clothes and Shaku and *Gouri* also went with her? That same day Subba comes to me and handing me a wet strip of banana fibre, tells me ‘Go, string some jasmine flowers; I’ll sell them for you in the town and bring you some money.’ I go to the backyard wondering why Brother is so nice to me today. When I get back, he is doing something in the room. I tell myself that he must have shut himself in the room to smoke a *beedi* . . .”

Neither Venkata, nor Shaku, nor *Gouri* said anything. Shaku went inside to comfort her mother. “We will find

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it. Where will it go? He must have pawned it. You eat," Venkata said urging *patrode* on me. He finished eating quickly. I went through the motions of eating. I went out of the house and sat down on the front steps. Thinking 'What hardships for these innocent creatures!'. I looked around me for any sign of Subba. From where I was sitting, I could see one or two houses in the distance, a temple and a trail made by people walking, another path leading to the town. Farther on, a green hill. The air was permeated with the fragrance of yellow-stemmed *parijata*. All over the frontyard of the house were flowering plants. The moonlight I had failed to see in Venkata's massage had now filled the flower garden. I could hear Rukku crying and whimpering inside: "Oh! How am I going to see my daughters married? Instead of what he did, why did he not stab his own mother's womb?"

Venkata came out and stood near me, and said "Ah, moonlight!" Probably he was seeking me out to wait for his wife's sorrow to subside. Maybe he felt uneasy thinking that I might be distressed. It pained me to see my friend so uncharacteristically quiet. "Come and sit," I said. "Nice fragrance, isn't it?" he said. I smiled and motioned to him to keep quiet. I am not good at comforting others. Still, I went inside to urge Rukku to eat. She went on weeping. I came out of the house again. "You know, our Ganga is very fond of this garden," Venkata said pacing to and fro in the garden.

Far into the night, nobody seemed able to sleep. It seemed to me unfair that of all the people in the world this innocuous Venkata should be punished with a son like Subba. Who knows what would have become of me, if I too had remained rotting in this village? Because I dared to defy my father and reject the family-traditions, I was able to grow and become what I am today. But was it inevitable in this family, too? Venkata seemed cowed by his son. His clowning, his massaging, his altruism—nothing seemed to be of any use here. This very moon, this shrub, this tree, these birds have nurtured a nature like Venkata's as well as inexplicable violence like Subba's. Can Venkata's

nature stomach it? Or, will it give in? If so, one can only feel pity and discomfiture at the clowning of an escapist. All the same, I couldn't just brush aside my childhood friend who had just begun to resuscitate my waning love for humankind. The image of Venkata petrified and cringing before his menacing son was still troubling me. With a stone in his raised hand, Subba had seemed like a barbaric caveman whose indomitable brute strength was about to explode. This barbaric defiance and denial seemed the very source and vital energy for the creation of nuclear weapons and poison gas. It was born of course out of the rejection of Venkata's narrow and insipid world. I know it, for I, too, defied my parents. In a state like Venkata's, one can only blossom like the *parijata* and then wither away. There is no movement in that state.

My imagination had probably exaggerated it when, before falling asleep, I thought of Subba as the image of movement. What is so heroic about stealing?—I later tried to temper my revolutionary thoughts. But I am still troubled by what I saw afterwards, just before daybreak when everyone else was asleep and outside, one could clearly see everything dew-drenched under the starlit sky.

I thought that I heard a sound coming from the garden. I got up and went out to see. It was the sound of a tree being cut down. "Who's there?" I called out and was about to go down the front steps when Subba shouted, brandishing a scythe at me, "If you come near, I'll cut you to pieces." I stood still. With his hair dishevelled, teeth gritted, cutting down the *parijata* tree in the morning twilight, he seemed a Rakshasa to me. He had already cut the flowering plants and shrubs down to the ground. Only the rugged and knotty *parijata* tree had still withstood the sweeping strokes of the scythe. Venkata, who had got up after me, ran toward Subba. Subba raised the scythe and would have brought it down upon his father had Venkata not ducked in time and ran back calling out the 'Mother Goddess!' I tried to restrain Rukku who squirmed in my clasp and shouted to her son, "Come, cut me up! Kill me! I gave birth to the poison and I'll

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die by it!" Freeing herself, she ran and stood before Subba while the daughters tried to stop her. "Don't you dare me! I'll chop your head off!" said Subba raising the scythe. We all stood there, eyes closed, stupefied. When I opened my eyes fearing the worst, Subba had jerked out the hand that held the scythe from his mother's grip, and, shouting curses, was walking away past the fence-gate. He walked briskly towards the town and was soon out of sight. Rukku still stood with eyes closed as if she expected the scythe to fall on her at any moment. Venkata dragged her by the hand into the house. Seeing her garden all razed to the ground, Ganga began to cry and, looking at her, her elder sisters cried, too. I sat down on the mound of earth, my senses all numbed. No comforting words were left in me. But I, who thought that all that had happened had left Venkata devastated, was in for a surprise in the morning.

It is astonishing how, no matter who dies or what the calamity is, life's routines go on. Despite the funereal air in Venkata's household that morning, Shakuntala made coffee. I cleaned my teeth with ashes of the ricehusk. Having had his early morning bath, Venkata was making the sandal paste for worship at the riverside temple. Only Rukku had taken to bed. Gouri hurriedly milked the cows, for the cowherd boy was already there to take them for grazing. I sensed that something inside Venkata had died, and not being able to look him in the eye, I came out and sat on the front-steps but couldn't bear the sight of the ruined garden and so went around to the backyard and stood there under the pomegranate tree.

Near the fence stood Venkata in his bandy-legged posture, with no clothes on except his loincloth. That is Venkata there by the backyard fence! 'What is he doing there, standing so engrossed?'—I wondered. He couldn't have gone out to evacuate, because I didn't see his sacred thread over his ear. Besides, he had already finished his morning ablutions and done his morning prayers. I watched him, standing there by the hedge, motionless like a temple idol, almost naked, engrossed. The green fencehedge facing him was tall, so he couldn't be seeing any-

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thing beyond it. I walked towards him softly, noiselessly, and stood behind him. Still, Venkata didn't know I was there. Curious to find out what he was looking at, I followed the direction of his gaze, peering at the hedge and scanning its leaves and flowers and everything else that came in the range of my vision. What came in sight was a grasshopper. For a moment, it was amusing to watch my friend, Simpleton Venkata, looking fascinatedly at this humpbacked, bentlegged, gaunt, green triangular insect, but only for a moment. Pressing down its bent legs, the grasshopper sprang and hopped away. The moment it sprang, Venkata's half-shaved head shook as if he just came out of a trance which I was glad to notice. Turning around and seeing me there behind him, he beamed an innocent smile and said, "Stallion of the Sun!" I looked into his fascinated eyes and my mouth fell open.

"Stallion of the Sun," I said.

'Suryana Kudure'

Tr. by NARAYAN HEGDE

Plus and Minus greater than Zero

SANTANU KUMAR ACHARYA

THEY tear ahead—rushing, rumbling, surging forth like a buoyant, deep, dark-green stream. The pebbles underfoot wobble like an excited throng of doves. ‘My dad was telling, you know...’ Chattering, chirping, twittering, they skip along. From their shoulders hang satchels, haversacks, dinner baskets, water bottles and what not. A day for nature-study and a holiday to boot. ‘Cheerio, buddyo, arm yourselves with butterfly nets, cameras and guns...’ The right kind of equipment to study nature with. ‘Butterflies apart, there’ll be grasshoppers, spiders, dragonflies, queen bees, snakes and mongooses. Maybe even a penguin or a pelican in the bargain. Whee!’

Stopping by a clump of bushes, one plucks a leaf and sniffs. Another pulls at a spindly branch, scrutinizes it and scribbles something in a notebook. Yet another leafs through a textbook, cracking his head over the botanical name of something. In the midst of it all, a lout lands a heavy whimsical blow on the bush. Withered leaves, dry seeds and flakes of mud drizzle down.

Startled butterflies swirl out of the massy green. Swooping with their silken nets, the boys trap a bevy of them. ‘Ah, excellent! Lovely!’ From inside the nets the butterflies wonder at the swirl of the gaudy clothes the boys wear. While they observe nature, nature observes them.

‘Hey!’ A dare-devil pipes up. ‘Let’s catch a snake, man.

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Damn the butterflies.'

'Snake?' another voice quivers like a hairspring.

'Yep, a snake. Real adventure, man. For adults only, I say. Got a camera, anyone?'

'Camera?'

'Yep, camera, you fat head. For heaven's sake, don't you know what a camera is? You know, the foreigners, especially the Americans, they don't give a damn to snakes. They wouldn't dream of clubbing them to death with sticks, like you chicken-guts. They don't even care to shoot them. They simply catch 'em.'

'Catch them? Don't pull a fast one.'

'Catch them, just as I tell you. With their bare hands. As well as with their cameras. How, eh? Listen, bumpkin...'

'Aw, shut up!' Hairspring raises his pitch. 'Don't give me that gas.' Flashing his butterfly net, he advances towards Snake-catcher. The long-forgotten butterflies, pale and distraught, buzz frantically.

Snake-catcher coolly saunters off towards a termite-hill beyond the bushes and leans against it, as though the throne of King Vikramaditya is buried inside. As he spins his yarn—for the benefit of Hairspring, possibly—his voice, not different from an adult's now, alternates between hoarse whisper and harsh stridency. Carried away by excitement, his exploring fingers stray all over his dress, twisting a button here, fiddling with something else there. 'They go in pairs,' he drones on. 'In pairs, mind you. Two's ideal for such outings. Man and his wife. Or, better still, the guy and his gal. Yankee gals are some gals, man. Excellent. And you know what they do? The girl has the camera and the guy proceeds towards the termite-hill...'

'Where the snakes have their holes?'

'Yep. The den of the monarch of the snakes, the King Cobra. The reptile lies outside the hole, all coiled up, snug and sleepy. The guy sneaks up. On tiptoe. Soon he goes down on his knees and crawls. Then he creeps on his belly—why, man, just like a snake!'

PLUS AND MINUS GREATER THAN ZERO

‘Then?’

‘Then? Steadily and surely the guy manages to reach the termite-hill. Then he signals to the girl. She’s ready with the camera. Meanwhile the snake is still lolling, blissfully unaware of anything untoward. Maybe it’s enjoying the breeze, or digesting the game it had gobbled up the previous night. Just then a furtive hand moves forward. The girl watches with bated breath. Tons of suspense. The snake begins to twitch its tail. The dumb bastard hasn’t caught on. Suddenly, in a flash, the guy’s hand closes firmly around the smooth slithery tail.’

‘Then?’

‘Then the hiss, you dunderhead.’

‘Of the snake?’

‘Of course. This is real adventure, man, and not any ole stuff. My dad was telling... C’mon, let’s go and catch a snake.’

‘The snake doesn’t bite the guy?’

‘Gosh, you bounder! No, the snake-o can’t. When it raises its hood to strike, the guy deftly moves his hand away to a safe distance. The raised fangs hit the dust and the venom gushes out, flooding the place. Meanwhile, of course, the girl keeps clicking the camera. The guy walks back to her, beaming with joy. The adventure’s over. The end.’

‘Then?’

‘Idiot, I told you the adventure’s over, damn it. Of course, sometimes, as Dad was telling, the whole bloody thing misfires and the snarling fangs land right down on the guy’s face—a lethal strike, the full burden of it. The poor sod crumples down right on the spot. But the girl—well, she’s free and fine, what does she care? She gets the biggest thrill, with the action-snaps of her dying boyfriend and the killer-cobra tucked away in her camera. Man, each such action-photograph would fetch not a buck less than a thousand dollars. My dad was telling...’ His voice trails off.

The conversation wears thin and the tumult dies down. The sun gets hotter. They unstrap their water bottles and gulp down

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mouthfuls and stretch out in the shade. For a while, there is a lull, the leaping waves of the fierce green stream subside. The butterflies, wallowing inside the silken nets, watch on with little amusement. Some of them have perished in the heat and those that haven't flutter their mournful wings. Someone yawns loudly. Another mockingly echoes him.

The butterflies squirm like an unwieldy mess. Wonders Hairspring, Of what? Emotions? Oh, no, mere sentiments—irrational, gratuitous, unwarranted. Suddenly his lithe, shod foot rises menacingly. The company winces. Shrieks, screams and futile attempts to stave off the mass murder follow. Bang! the foot comes down heavily. 'Stuff and nonsense!' he blurts out, smacking his lips, extricating his foot from the mess. 'They must die if they must.' His vulnerable voice betrays little improvement. His furrowed brows, now poised like supercilious question marks over his big brooding eyes, look corny as the blackened skin of a prematurely ripe banana.

'You brute!' Snake-catcher cries. 'You must die if anyone must. Dad was telling. . .'

'Aw, c'mon, you, cry baby!'

'Shut your trap, you sissy. Only a minute ago you nearly messed your pants at the merest mention of a snake. Hell, who taught you adventure, you sissy?'

'Sissy, I?'

'Who'd dream of killing poor little butterflies? Sign of sheer effeminacy. Inferiority complex. Dad was telling. . .'

'Hang your dad, you bastard!' His voice goes berserk like the taut strings of a violin plucked violently. 'Don't you show off your bloody daddy.'

Bang! Action: Snake-catcher—superiority complex—throws his hat in. Bang! Reaction! Hairspring—inferiority complex—responds. They look like two clouds moving towards each other, both equally dark and sinister. Lightning splits the sky as they collide. They grapple and throttle each other. They hit the dust, rise quickly and start all over again. Action. Reaction.

The company, the silent spectators, stand huddled together

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at a distance and watch the proceedings. (What else can they do? Don't they stand apart and gawk like this at all times, in all ages, these ordinary, commonplace folks? Not for them this strife to be extraordinary or uncommon. They know pretty well that none but the ordinary shall inherit the earth and enjoy its fruits. The extraordinary, the uncommon—they always carry with them the seeds of their own destruction. There's a Rama for every Ravana. Communism for capitalism. Minus for plus. And vice versa. If one is there, the other isn't far behind.)

The battle rages. Neither of them gives up. Contrary to the expectations, Hairspring rallies eminently well to the challenge, parrying the blows with agility and skill. They stalk, jump, whirl, swing around, trampling more butterflies to death. The tension swells. 'They must die if they must,' Hairspring hisses. 'You must die if anyone must,' Snake-catcher shouts. The stones and pebble scrunch under their warring feet.

A little way down, where a stretch of roadwork was in progress, there stood a huge barrel of molten tar. The labourers had retired for lunch. Suddenly from nowhere a screeching little sparrow fell into the barrel. It landed on the hot molten tar with a dull thud.

The boys were aghast. 'Oh God!' burst out one of them. 'Oh God, such a tiny little thing! Oh, save it—somebody, please.' They milled around the barrel, some of them leaning over and stretching out their hands.

The first to heed their piteous cry was Snake-catcher. 'Wait,' he spluttered, placing his hand on his heaving chest. 'Spit-mud! Can't you hear them shouting for help? We've got to save that poor little birdie. Let's stop this for a while.'

'A little birdie, huh?' Anger still blazed in the bosom of Hairspring. 'I wouldn't dream of an interruption even if it was a human being. No spit-mud trick now, you sissy!'

Bang! Action. Bang! Reaction. To every action there is equal and opposite reaction.

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‘Save him’, the boys screamed in panic. ‘Oh, save John. He’s drowning.’

‘John drowning?’ Gautam’s hairspring voice trembled. ‘Drowning? John, my opponent?’

John sank like a torpedoed ship. Resolute and unflinching, he raised his hands. In the hollow of his palms fluttered the tar-smeared little bird, like a torn flag on the masthead of a ship.

Gautam leaned over the side of the barrel and watched. The company had long fled from the gruesome sight. But he stood rooted to the ground, as if he and John were the twin poles of the same magnet. The tar reached John’s neck. Gautam clambered on to the narrow edge of the barrel and stretched out his hand to him. As their hands touched, a shudder shot through them—a flash of electric current flowed. The sparks fused them, blending their separate identities into a single whole.

Gautam gave John a tug. Then John gave him one. He swayed, lost his slim toehold on the edge of the barrel and dropped into the pool of tar.

Long before Gautam sank neckdeep, John had vanished from sight. The warm tar reached his mouth. Past all human struggles now, he discovered the little bird had dropped from John’s hands. In the fullness and finality of his consciousness, he picked it up and settled down by John’s side to be entombed in eternity.

Late in the afternoon, the road gang returned to resume the work. They found a human hand sprouting, like a tender branch, out of the grimy pool of tar. And the branch bore a single exotic fruit: a little bird, its wings aflutter.

‘+ & -> 0’

*Tr. by LEELAWATI MOHAPATRA
and K.K. MOHAPATRA*

City of Gold

PUDUMAIPITTAN

EVER heard of Ponnagaram, the city of gold? It doesn't bear the least resemblance to the dream-cities of our myth-makers. In fact, the only justification one can think of for the existence of this city is the law of Karma, which says that one's present condition happens to be the just deserts of one's actions in one's previous birth. It is indeed a city of gold for those human worker-bees, whose destiny it is to exist in order that those few lucky souls, who are born to live it up in this birth, may fulfil their destinies.

See that lane there? Yes, the one that leads to the arrack depot. That is the main street. Four men could easily walk abreast in it, hand in hand, if no vehicles cross their path. Labyrinthine curves branch off from this lane as in a rabbit-warren.

To get a proper view of this splendid locale, one must go there when a lingering rain has petered out into a drizzle. The scene is quite a feast for the eyes, with squelchy puddles all over the place. By the side of the street flows the Municipal Ganga. Or is it the Municipal Yamuna? Yes. That must be it, for it is the waters of the Yamuna that are said to be black. Farther on, you see the railings, beyond which, on raised ground, runs the railway track.

On the other side of the street is this row of cells. Yes? Quite so. These are indeed meant for human habitation. Water

taps? Yes, there are. Electric lights? Well. . .can't remember. Anyway, oil lamps would serve as well, don't you agree? Even these need be lit only during the moonless half of the month.

The children of the place like to play at fishing. The sacred waters of the Municipal sewer can't possibly sustain any fish, though. But an occasional overripe fruit or a mouldy *vada* from some far-off wealthy house does come bobbing on the waters. This is a closely guarded secret among the children.

The height of enjoyment for these children is to play near the railway line. There is that fence, to be sure, but the children just aren't aware that it is not meant to be crossed. As for the parents, they think a child 'gone' is one less to worry about. Not being bonny Glaxo-babies, slipping through the railings is no great feat for these children anyway. And, oh, the thrill of standing there, all in a neat row, and calling out "Good morn, sir," when that smoky symbol of an iron civilization rushes past them! This also happens to be their only taste of an English education.

The town bestirs itself into life only after five in the evening. That is when the women begin their chores. The area soon becomes a *melée* of arrack-laden carts and women collecting water with a veritable *Mahabharata*-war at the tap.

The wisps of cotton on her hair make her look prematurely grey. Her eyes are dull. You can't expect anything better. Can you? Eyes, after all, are not made of iron, and a night-long stint at the mill, watching an electric spindle, is not the best way to care for one's eyes.

A life of labour has bestowed on her the firm outlines of a healthy body. Health? How does that fit into this scenario, this breeding ground of poisonous germs, of bacteria, of cholera and every other disease? But then, sir, where there is a strong will to survive, anything is possible. Stone-age man dwelt in the caves, along with the tiger and the lion. They killed him and he killed them. But was that enough to subdue him? Or to stop him



Drawing : Jai Zharotia

multiplying? His species is far from extinct. Oh well, life itself is a great hunt. Shall we leave it at that?

She wears a black string round her neck, a sign that she is yoked to someone. Not that it means much in this place. It is a world apart, I tell you, with its own codes, its own *dharma*.

She, Ammalu, works as a mill-girl. She is just twenty. Or twentytwo at the most. Her husband, Murugesan, drives a tonga for a living, it being his own cart. Ammalu, Murugesan, Murugesan's mother and younger brother and his horse—these are the five members of his family. The whole family (including the horse) has to be fed out of the earnings of Ammalu and her

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husband. Other demands on their income include house-rent, bribes for the police and the clandestine ganja-smoking of Murugesan's brother. All of them drink, that being the only way to deaden hunger during the lean months. Hunger. You know the thing, don't you? Yes. Hunger, "at the approach of which, all the ten virtues desert a man." You are so fond of quoting that verse, aren't you? Only, you quote it so glibly, so elegantly aloof. If you lived in this place for a day, you'd realize the meaning of hunger. You'd feel it right down there, in your guts.

Murugesan was in high spirits that day. So he and his horse got drunk and took part in a race. The cart rolled on its side, its axle broken, and the driver and the horse were both seriously injured. Though he had no open wounds, Murugesan had suffered some nasty knocks and was brought in unconscious. Mercifully, he was too drunk to feel much pain. Ammalu ground up something and smeared it on his swellings. He spoke a few words then: he would like to have some gruel with milk. With two more days to go for Ammalu's wages, there was no money left at home.

Ammalu then goes to fetch some water. It is pitch-dark. According to the almanac the moon is scheduled to make an appearance on this night. That it chooses to hide itself behind clouds can't really be blamed on the Municipality. There is the usual hullabaloo at the tap. Ammalu gets some water somehow, and starts for home.

Near the lane stands a man who has had an eye on Ammalu for quite some time now.

Together they disappear into the darkness. And Ammalu manages to earn three quarters. Yes. To give her husband his milk-gruel.

Look, all ye prattling promoters of chastity, this—is the city of gold.

'Ponnagaram'

Tr. by GOMATHI NARAYANAN

The Milk Soured

JOGINDER PAUL

MUNOO is heading towards the outer gate of the bungalow and close on his heals is advancing the dawn. Everyday at sunup the poor little darling gets out of sight. He does all the chores of the house. But the householders hardly get to feel his presence. None knows whether he is alive or dead. Only yesterday, Bari, the elder girl, was telling a story to Chhoti, the younger one, "Are you listening, Chhoti? All the chores of the tiny princess were done by a puny djinn. But that little djinn was visible to none, not even to the princess "

In the meantime, Munoo appeared on the scene with a glass of milk for Chhoti and stood beside her. It suddenly occurred to Chhoti to ask, "Wasn't that tiny djinn our Munoo, eh?"

The idea of being a djinn has tingled Munoo and he imagines giving a jerk to the moustache of his sleeping master. And when the old man gets startled and sits up in his bed, this tiny djinn starts dancing merrily in the dull electric light. Along with him, his shadow, too, has started prancing. He has enjoyed the dance of his shadow so immensely that he stops short to watch it. And lo! with the brat, his shadow has also stopped. This game fascinates him so much that he now starts dancing with his tiny steps and now he stops short. Just then, the guava tree, growing on the edge of the lawn, has dropped a mellow fruit on his head, saying : "Now make a move, Munoo! If you get late, you

won't get the milk."

Holding the guava in one hand, he digs his teeth into it. Swinging the milk-can with the other hand he has reached the gate. The closed iron-gate is asleep. So light is its sleep that the moment you open it a little, it wakes up with a creaking sound. Munoo has started laughing. He wonders how it could, with its static position all the time, get sound sleep. Sound sleep is possible only if you stir out and keep moving about. The fancy of the doors moving about has again tickled him into a laughter... "Wait!" he seems to look up at the door moving. "Whither are you rushing? You are walking right in the middle of the road. I say, wait! you may be run over by a huge truck and fall into pieces. Wait! come back, or how would the people enter home without you? Stroking his master's gate with his fingers, Munoo recalls his father's house and grows sad... well, yes, Bapu's house had no doors at all. Even sitting inside, one felt one were outside in the open. Early in the morning, a black cloud of the rainy season has descended into his eyes and he looks like enjoying this pleasant weather so much. "O you son of Munoo," his father always addressed him as such. As if Munoo was fated to spend his childhood by being his own father. "Come! Why don't you come in? Don't you see it's raining outside?" "But inside, it's pouring, Bapu." Silenced, his father would sit on, getting quietly drenched inside his house. But how long could one go on getting drenched, Munoo asks himself. I craved for a roof above us so that the dull cheeks of my mother, baking loaves, might get flushed and Bapu might sprawl on the string-cot and smoke his hookah. And sitting in a corner, I might make a tiny house, out of damp dust of the floor while my sister might cry and exhort to me to make her one first. What use was it to make her a house? When cholera broke out in the village, she was the first casualty. The little fool was very fond of getting married even at that tender age. Everyday she would bring home a new bridegroom made of straws... Munoo! won't you make a house for me? My groom and I would live in it. You may also join us, Munoo!... Who

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knows at what place and with what groom she settled after her demise.

Tearfully Munoo has slipped to the base of the iron gate. From across the lawn, lady-night blossoms have beckoned him in their fragrant, chirpy voice, "Munoo, o Munuva!" Munoo stands up with a start, puzzled. From where is my sister Fattan calling me? "Munoo—oo—ooo." Lady-night flowers have again called him "Munoo! . . . Fattan! Munoo! . . ." Heaving a deep sigh, Munoo has breathed her scented memory into his heart and is refreshed. He then opens the sleeping gate a little and stepping on the road outside he seems to have entered the nightmare of the iron shutters.

The jungle of iron and cement has at once besieged him and the haunting pale lights of electric bulbs have started shelling him. Consequently many pits are showing on the desolate road. Still, the twelve-year-old boy, like some charmed tiny character, is playfully pressing onward. From his ribs emerges his own shadow and whirling round his form starts lengthening. Viewing such a long shadow of his own he bursts into laughing. He muses: How tall I have grown! He starts strutting. If the quarrelsome gardener of the adjacent bungalow showed up just this moment, he would teach him a lesson for all his life. The old rascal!—he mutters, clenching a fist, and fixing his eyes on its big shadow in cheerful anger.

Munoo has cautioned himself that if he continued trudging like an ass, he would not be able to get the milk. He has slung the milk-can over his arm and feels that his back, instead of standing vertically on his legs, is lying flat on four legs and he is himself seated on it. In front of him is sitting his sister, Fattan. And, beside them is their father followed by their coughing mother. And thus, all of them are going to attend Devi's Fair in the adjoining village.

Munoo has been walking like a swinging donkey for long. He suddenly witnesses a brown cat staring at him and stops short. "Here, Fattan!" as if he were addressing his sister in the fair, "Look at your groom," making a groom of his hand he

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has projected it towards the cat. As the cat growls in response, his master's face flashes before his eyes, "Mind it, Munoo! if you bring the milk late even today, I shall make you stand as a cock for full one hour."

Fluttering like a cock, Munoo has hastened forward and feels an urge to crow loudly in a clear, ringing voice so that all the people in the neighbourhood might wake up and even on waking may think that they are hearing the crowing in sleep.

"Well, Munoo! tell me," Chhoti once asked him, "what a living cock looks like?"

"Just like the one printed in your books, Chhoti."

"Chhoti! eatables are as they appear on the dining table," the elder girl started impressing upon the younger one. "Come on, it is dinner time. You will enjoy eating the leg of chicken."

"Eat, my precious, why don't you eat?" Suddenly the voice of Bapu has started singing in Munoo's mind. "Even your father shouldn't have tasted such meat of sheep." His Bapu stole an old sheep from somewhere and fearing that someone might get the wind of it he slaughtered the sheep the same day and put it on the stove to cook.

"No, Fattan's father. . . *Whoop. . . Hoop*," Munoo could not make out his mother's voice unless she was coughing. "I will not allow my children to eat the stolen stuff. We are quite content with our plain fare of *dal* and rice."

"But do you know that the *dal* and rice I bring are also the stolen stuff?"

"No, no. . . I'm sure my children will not be able to digest this sheep of yours. . . *Whoop. . . Hoop*."

"Be it stolen sheep or hard-earned stone, children of the poor can digest all. Now you get aside?"

"No, never. . . *Whoop. . . Hoop. . . Hoop*!" As his Bapu flared up and pushed his mother violently, she fell prostrate on the floor and her nose started bleeding.

Puzzled, his Bapu succoured her and seating her on the cot started wiping blood from her nose and massaging her bosom. After a short while, she started breathing freely. Then he

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observed : "No, you aren't wrong either."

As his mother felt one up, forgetting all her anguish, she suggested, "Listen to me. Take this kettle of cooked meat to the temple and place it at the feet of Lord Krishna."

"And what would happen if your Baap, that pandit, chances to notice it?"

"Why should he notice? You are father of thieves. Go and place it inside as stealthily as you brought it. . . *Whoop!*"

"But God eats only 'ladoos' and 'pedas'. He doesn't touch meat with a pair of tongs."

"So what? He will gift it to some meat-eater. Go, please go, just now."

"Let darkness descend at least, woman of good omen! If some one detects me, be sure, he will not spare my life."

Munoo's Bapu did go. But, as ill-luck would have it, that night, at quite a late hour, the priest, sitting behind the idol, was counting cash-offerings of the day. Hearing the sound of a foot-fall, as he raised his head above the idol's, Bapu took to his heels. On hearing the alarm raised by the priest, several people gathered, nabbed Bapu and beat him black and blue. They snapped : "Look at the audacity of the lowcaste cobbler. In order to pollute the God he has brought a whole potful of cooked meat."

As Munoo's mother was fomenting Bapu's injuries, he complained : "I had told you."

"Yes, Fattan's father. . . *Whoop. . . Hoop. . .*"

While turning at the first crossing, Munoo is intrigued. Only a short while ago he had emerged from the bungalow to fetch milk and full four years have already rolled by. The innocent boy hardly knows that time waits for none. Only we await time and grow old and are then dead and gone. But Fattan died long before she could grow old. At her tender age, she would wait for a new groom every day and when he did not show up, she would make one with mud, grass and straws. Before the bier of Fattan was taken out, Munoo had laid about two dozen grooms beside her.

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Munoo has thought that by now his ailing mother might have passed away. At the time of Fattan's death she had suffered such a terrible stroke of difficult breathing. Everybody feared that instead of one, two funerals would be lifted from that house. While he is thinking of his mother, a strange image of hers is etched on the canvas of his mind : an unreal shadowy being, coughing, writhing and endlessly moving her hands to do household chores. How he had always longed he should seat her comfortably on a cot and take upon himself to do all the chores.

"No, my darling! your job is only to play. Go and play."

But with whom could he play? Fattan had died long ago.

On the day their neighbour, Chaudhari, had visited their house to bring him to Delhi for work, his mother had a stroke of difficult breathing. Just like the one she had on Fattan's death.

"The elder one has already slipped out of our hand, Fattan's father. Let at least Munoo stay with us."

They had also sent Munoo's older brother to Delhi for work. He used to send them twentyfive rupees every month. But eight months ago his master wrote that the boy had eloped with some girl. After that, he neither wrote to his parents nor sent any money.

"Don't talk about him, Fattan's mother!" Mention of the elder son always infuriated Bapu. "I keep mum because of your indifferent health. Otherwise who knows better than you that he is a bastard," he paused and drew deeply at his extinguishing hookah. "Had he been the true son of his father, he would not have shirked repaying us for his upbringing. Well, damn him. Chaudhari has given a word on our behalf to a sahib in Delhi. The sahib would keep sending us twentyfive rupees every month. Munoo will get free board, lodging and clothes. What else can you ask for? Death by Asthma?" As the extinguished hookah did not fill his mouth with smoke, he flared up, "I was unlucky to marry an ailing buffalo like you. Had you not dried up, you would have given birth to at least ten babes. Just calculate, how

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Drawing : Jai Zharotia

much is ten times twentyfive? What a loss I have incurred because of your premature drying up." Stirring extinguished embers in the chellum with his fingers, he paused again. "Do you want to forego even this paltry sum?"

As sixteen-year old Munoo, smoking with one hand and swinging the can with the other, is walking on his way to the milk-booth with long strides, he runs into a middle-aged well-dressed man who on his morning-walk meets him at this very point daily. Munoo knows that this man, for his daily exercise, breathes deeply with his eyes almost shut. Today the upper half of his purse is swinging outside his pocket. Munoo has dexterously picked the purse and pouting his mouth, has surged

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onward whistling. On the next crossing he opens the purse, counts fifteen rupees and a little change and pocketing the amount throws the empty purse into the drain. Humming a film tune he decides to go for a matinee-show today. Even if his mistress did not give permission, go he would. "I am a servant, not a slave." Then he starts repeating a dialogue spoken by some film hero : "So what, mom, if I'm poor. I too have a right to live. I love your daughter sincerely, mom. *Sachi Mohabat!*"

Munoo has fiftyfive rupees in his pocket, true love on his lips and mom's imaginary daughter in his embrace. In this fantastic mood he longs for a gang of villains to appear from nowhere and assault him. He has already floored them all. After knocking down the last assaulter, he shouts a victorious *ha!—a!* An eczema-stricken bitch has got up with a start and, facing him, begins to yelp.

When Munoo reached Delhi to be a domestic servant at his Master's, an ulcer had appeared in his armpit. It gave him a lot of trouble for quite some time. This external ulcer had got healed in a few days. But the ulcer that had grown within the boy on separation from his parents ached for a long time. But as his father received his twentyfive rupees every month regularly, he felt assured that Munoo was hale and hearty.

Munoo is still advancing towards the milk-booth. By the time he reaches Shivaji Park two more years have elapsed. In this park, lots of old people gather daily for deep-breathing, yogic exercises and physical jerks with spurious laughing. An old man stares at Munoo wide-eyed and showers on him guffaws galore like a volley of bullets. Flabbergasted, Munnoo is hastening onward.

"Munoo ! O Munoo !"

Adjusting his breath he looks back. The Marathi Ayah, leaving behind the crying baby in the pram, is giving him a hot chase.

"Here !" She thrusts under his nose an apple which probably she has stolen from her master's house. Munoo takes the apple unhesitatingly and looks beaming like a beloved.

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The Marathi Ayah is older than Munoo by about a dozen years but she has fallen head over heels in love with him and she longs to elope with him from Delhi to Bombay.

"What have you decided, oh ?"

"I've already told you, I cannot go with you at the moment."

"Hardly matters. Think coolly," Apti has embraced him in her eyes. "What do they pay you ?"

"I told you even yesterday, my pay has been raised to a full hundred."

In our Bombay you'll get a full two hundred. Besides, I'll be making another three hundred every month. Our board and lodging will be free. What else do you want ? A mango ?" She winks.

As the baby lying in the pram has started crying very loudly, she turns to the pram. But before leaving the scene she exclaims, "Let's meet again here tomorrow. O.K. ?"

Munoo promises by nodding, and swinging the can with his hand, resumes his walk.

Munoo has turned out to be a splendid youth. He keeps the cast-off clothes of his master ready by washing and ironing and goes out dandily dressed in them. When he stares at passing girls, he finds them too casting searching glances at him and getting an electric shock in his entire frame he feels like clasping the the lamp-post. Often at his house he views tele-movies in which ultimately the master willingly and happily offers the hand of his daughter to his servant, observing : "My son, what of it if you are poor. I am here. You have nothing to worry about." But it is just at this point that his worry begins. What should he do now ? Many a time he had caught himself solemnizing his marriage with Chhoti in his imagination. The elder one was already married and Chhoti had become eligible. He knows right well that Chhoti can no longer be satisfied with being observed from a distance. "Munnoo, come here ! Yes, please ! Hold this hair-drier and stand behind me. Not that far. Come closer, closer !" And then he hears the words that have

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probably frozen on her lips. He stops a pace away from her hair fluttering in the puffs of the hair-drier. "You fool, come forward." But what could the fool do ? If he did not recede, he would land in jail.

Munoo's mother had died more than a year ago, but he got the sad news only two months before. That night he had spent viewing his mother in his dreams. While awake, he had never thought of her. His master used to remit fifty rupees to his parents by money-order and hand over the balance to him. And he, adding to this money the swindled and stolen amounts, led a luxurious life. But on that night in his dreams his mother would not get away from his gaze. *Whoop . . . Hoop . . . Hoop !* A red gale is blowing in the village. Their hut has blown away and at the same spot he stands rendered homeless. His mother is shouting, "Where are you, Munoo ! Munuva ! *Whoop . . . Hoop !*" He has been lost in the fair of Pir Jamal's *Urs* and goes round it, crying. All of a sudden his mother appears from nowhere and binds him in her arms, saying : "Munuva . . . *Whoop . . . Hoop !*" "Mother, when I grow up, I too shall go to Delhi." "No, never ! The one that went never came back. If you too go away, what shall I do ?" "No, mother !"—In the small hours of the night his sleep broke. Before waking he was hugging his mother. Probably she was going out. But she had never gone out. Even on waking, Munoo kept dreaming. He was worried where she had disappeared.

That day as Munoo's master asked him : "Why are you looking so sad ?", Munoo burst into tears, exactly as he had cried when the ulcer had appeared in his armpit. "I shall go to see my mother, Sahib !"

His master found it hard to hold the truth from him any longer. "But it has been several months since she died."

For a while the hissing sound of the kitchen tap was heard. Then silence fell.

"I did not tell you, Munoo. For I thought you would never come back in any case."

Munoo told himself that since he had not been able to go to

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her, she had, after searching for him for months, come to him. How could she die comfortably without having met him. Munoo heaved a long sigh and felt relieved. Well, it's good she met me before departing. And father ? "Sahib ! send a hundred rupees to my father this month." Both the parents were dismissed from his mind. "Munoo ! O Munoo ! where's my hair-drier ? . . . Munoo !" "Coming !" "Come closer, Munoo ! Closer !--closer !" He stops a pace away from the fluttering hair.

Now Munoo can clearly see the milk-booth, just a hundred and fifty yards away. But in order to reach here he has spent about three years.

This part of the market is all the time crowded. At the entrance, on the corner, is a betel shop. He must stop here before proceeding further. Kasturi Lal, the betel-seller, is his close friend. On his arrival, Kasturi gifts him a special *desi* betel, stuffed with three types of tobacco. Now and then he also puts in the special pill that would make a person stagger out of his body. Munoo feels that, but for him, everyone else is staggering. A major part of his extra income he deposits with Kasturi. They enjoy themselves together with this money. "You are a king of kings, Munoo," Kasturi tells him. "I have known many a big shot but I have never come across a more lavishly generous person."

"Be happy, my loving love ! Just as there is only one Munoo, my Kasturi too has no equal."

"Then have it, my king of kings !" he palms off the betel to Munoo with the special pill in it. "Taste this one, Kasturi's double-dozer, and set out on your adventurous journey."

About a year ago, a man from Munoo's village came and told him that his father was no more. To begin with, Munoo was intrigued as which bastard had been receiving his fifty rupees, which he had been sending his old Bapu every month. But then he laughed and remarked lightly: "To tell you the truth, Kasturi, my father should have popped off just after my mother's death. What had the lonely soul to do in this world now." Then he emptied his head with a jerk and added : "Thank God, it is

over."

"Then have it, my king of kings ! . . . "

A few paces ahead of the betel-shop was a drug-store from where Munoo used to purchase, for his master and mistress, nostrums for building up virility. Once he had swallowed two such pills with hot milk. He was so turned on that running into Chhoti, he involuntarily caught hold of her wrist. And, in response, as she just smiled instead of getting angry, he felt he had got the biggest bonanza. After that they became more and more intimate. Often she would ask him to bring that very betel which made her lurch. On such occasions Munoo swallowed with milk the pills meant for her presents. And as soon as she lurched, he held her, and kept holding her throughout the night in her exclusive room.

Since the very beginning, Munoo had been mighty afraid of red-turbaned cops. One afternoon when in the market near the sweetmeat shop he saw a handcuffed thief tied to the belt of a cop he edged towards him and his own hands got automatically folded near his navel. The cop glanced at him and said smilingly : "Why, are you too coming with him ?"

His mouth drying up, he asked : "What wrong have I done, Santry-ji ?"

"I know right well what black deeds you folks commit. Come on, get me a glass of *lassi*."

Whenever he chanced to exchange glances with some cop out on his beat in the market area, he would slip away. Or, he would meekly salute him and ask : "Would you care for a *lassi*, Jamadar Sahib ?"

Once a cop, after taking *lassi* brought by Munoo, twisted his moustache and tapping him on the shoulder remarked : "To me you appear to be a real ring-leader. Tell me your name ?"

"Munoo, Hazoor !"

"Father's name?"

"Radhe Ram."

"How did bloody Radha join Rama ? You are indeed what I believe you are. Well, which village do you hail from ? What

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do you do ? How much do you get as wages ? Give me a straight answer.”

After collecting full particulars, the cop said : “Now your entire record is preserved in my mind. Go, get me another glass of *lassi*. Then I will direct you to a house you will ever remember.”

“No. Santry-ji ! I am not that type.”

“Well, I know your type. Get me another glass of *lassi*.”

Munoo has arrived at the milk-booth. Luckily there is no other customer at the moment. So he gets his turn at once. After making payment he has put the empty can under the tap of the machine. As the milk-boy starts turning the handle, a thick current of milk issues from the machine as if nipples of scores of mothers have got together and started flowing freely. Munoo’s mother used to tell him: “I’ve never seen a child more naive than you. I would thrust my nipple into your mouth but brushing it aside you would start playing with the milk.” This habit of Munoo’s sucking period has persisted. Viewing the milk pouring into the can, in a vacant mood, he is busy playing with the nipples of his mother and emitting sounds. And the empty can has filled in no time. While putting on the lid of the can he feels he has tightened the lid over his head and turns to go home.

Munoo has seen Kasturi washing utensils in front of his shop. But he wants to surge onward quietly so that he might not get late. “Mother’s swain is not bad at heart but when agitated he goes mad”—he accelerates his speed, the abusive noise of his master ringing in his ears.

“Stop, my king of kings !” he hears Kasturi who has seen him passing by.

“No, Kasturi !” applying brakes to himself he pleads, “I’ll get late.”

“Well, everybody gets late, but do let me give you a happy piece of news.”

Turning, Munoo walks up to him. “Shoot. What is it ? I am already quite late.”

"Last night, a man came from your village. He says all the news of the death of your mother and father is false."

"Yes ?" Munoo leaps with joy. But soon his face falls, thinking that now again he shall have to send the money every month. "But once you have gone up to the heavens, how can you return ?"

"My king of kings, if you can go up, why can't you come down ?"

Munoo held himself from sitting down there, "I'm getting late, Kasturi. After finishing my work I shall be coming again."

"All right, in the meantime, I shall set in order the ingredients of the double-dozer for you.

Munoo has set out for his house and is hastening now. And from behind, his mother and Bapu in their anxious voice, are trying to stop him. But with unsteady steps he is pressing onward. While it took him ten years to reach the market, he has taken only ten minutes to return home from the market. And reaching the bungalow he heads direct to the kitchen to deposit the milk. After handing over the can to the cook he turns to the bedrooms to dust them. Engaged in dusting the rooms, he frequently turns the duster on his own face. Suddenly he hears the voice of his mistress : "Arre ! The milk has turned sour. It must be stale."

"No, Bibiji !" the cook replies, "the milk is very fresh. It's the can that has soured it."

'Dudh Puttar'

Tr. by RAJINDER SINGH VERMA



Writers and Their Works

Nabinchandra Sen on his 'Rangamati' Kavya

Nabinchandra Sen (1847-1909) was a junior contemporary of Bankimchandra Chatterji and is considered, after Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Hemchandra Banerji, the third notable epic poet in Bengali. Among his well-known works are *Palasir Yuddha*, *Rangamati* and a trilogy on *Mahabharata*. In this autobiographical writing, Sen deals with the background to the writing of his *Rangamati* and his contacts with Bankim Chatterji.—Ed.

IF I remember rightly, it was soon after I was posted as Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Chattogram (Chittagong) that my poem *Palasir Yuddha* (Battle of Palasi) was published. The stir caused by its publication all over Bengal was much beyond my expectation, and I could never have dreamed of the eagerness with which it was presented in dramatized form in the National Theatre soon after the poem was published. Thus encouraged, I began composing the poem *Rangamati* soon after. After I had written the first part, I decided that I would write the rest only after I had actually seen Rangamati and not just imagined it. Rangamati was no other than the capital of the hill-tracts of Chattogram, which fell under the jurisdiction of the Commissioner of Chattogram. The following year, it was proposed that the Commissioner should visit the annual fair of the Lusai tribe at Devagiri (Demagri). Devagiri was situated deeper within the hilly region than even Rangamati. It was also the site of a famous cascade

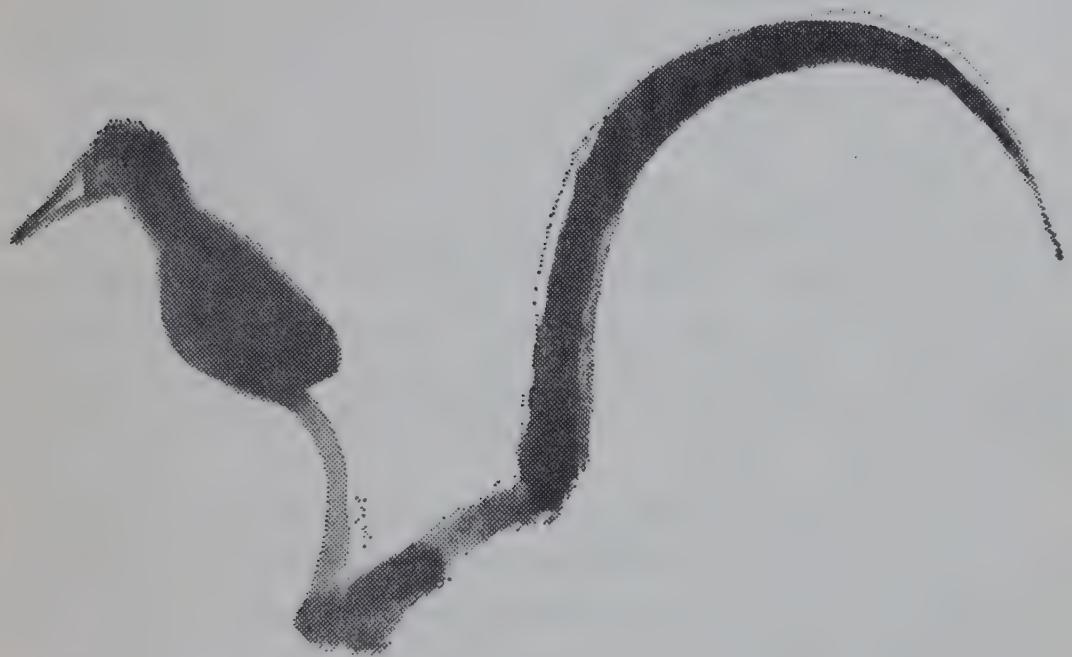
whose mass of water fell from a considerable height directly into the Karnaphuli river. I heard of the incomparable splendour of its view and had partly based my description of it in *Rangamati* on such hearsay. I was therefore delighted at the prospect of viewing it with my own eyes and, at my pleading, the Commissioner agreed to take me along. All arrangements for the trip were complete when the Deputy Commissioner sent a telegram informing that an inmate of Rangamati jail had become ill with cholera. The Commissioner immediately backed out of the trip. I tried very hard to persuade him, then sent a telegram to the Deputy Commissioner and obtained his reply assuring that there was no risk, but the Commissioner would not even agree to pass Rangamati on the way to Devagiri. He told me, "Don't feel too disappointed. We shall visit the fair next year." I also deferred the writing of *Rangamati* till the following year.

Some time after this, I did visit Rangamati when the Commissioner went there on inspection. This too had required a certain amount of pleading from me. But it was not in my fate to view the waterfalls of Devagiri and other beauties of the hilly interior region. Whatever I saw, however, captivated my eyes as well my mind. . .

Soon after returning from Rangamati, I was transferred, in troubled circumstances, from Chattogram to Puri. I did not get a chance to work on *Rangamati*. Some problems, then my brother's death, then the litigation with the Raja of Puri, left me no time of my own. When I moved to Madaripur I spent the first year almost flattened by the pressure of work. Only when I went home on leave for two months did I resume the writing of *Rangamati* after a gap of three years and finished it after I returned to Madaripur. Thus, the composition of *Rangamati* took nearly five years altogether.

I recall one morning I was writing the last scene. Tears flowed down my cheeks as I created that sad scene. At that point, my peshkar arrived carrying a heap of summons and warrants. Seeing my tears, he put on a sorrowing expression and asked, "Have you received some bad news from home?" I laug-

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Drawing : Jai Zharotia

hed and said, "No, not at all. As for those papers, I shall attend to them when I come to the kacheri, not now." He said with some hesitation, "These are all summons for sessions cases. They can't be served unless they are posted today." So I had to suspend the writing of poetry and spend an hour or so raining signatures on those documents. The peshkar went away. I began writing again, and again, working up a sad, tearful mood as I wrote, when the head-clerk appeared with another pile of papers. He was a very good man but rather timid. My tears obviously worried him but he did not know what to say and only gazed at me sorrowfully. He too thought that I had received the news of somebody's death. On seeing that expression on his face I wiped my tears, smiled and said, "I am very busy right now. Can't I attend to those papers when I go to the kacheri?" He said with some trepidation, "There are some urgent returns and other letters. They have to be posted today." I felt so irritated that I threw my manuscript to one corner of the room and told him, "Come, show what you have brought." Quite intimidated now, he said, "Let it be for now. You can see them in the kacheri." I firmly said 'No' and put out my hand for the papers. I worked

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on them till it was time for my bath. The manuscript of *Rangamati* lay where it had been thrown. When a servant came to clean the room and sought to pick it up, I forbade him.

For the next fifteen days, I just could not find any spare time. One day at last, with a little time in hand, I picked up the manuscript. But what could I write? That fervour was no longer there, that emotion did not swell my heart, those tears did not fill my eyes. I had forgotten all that I had created in my imagination. I forced myself to complete the last scene. Alas for the Bengali poet who makes a living in slavery! Can poetry be written in such a state?

After finishing the long poem I decided that I must dedicate it to Bankimchandra. I wrote to him, enclosing the manuscript, and asked if he would accept the dedication. A few days later I received this reply:

Chinsurah
July 15/80

My dear Nati,

I have read through your delightful poem,—and I was detaining it for the purpose of giving it a second perusal. As, however, the publication is being delayed, the second perusal may stand over till it is the property of the public.

The dedication of it would be an honour to any Bengali—and it is an honour which I certainly have done nothing to deserve. But as *undeserved* honours are the order of the day, I do not see why I should scruple to receive my share. So fire away, and glorify grandad to your heart's content.

I am afraid that History (*he had at one time wanted to write a history of India*¹) is not likely to make much progress. I have, however, got through a few chapters (*Where are these now?*) and also through a novel (*Anandamath*)—so to call it—but I have not the slightest idea when the latter will be ready for publication.

Trusting this find you all serene,

I remain,
Yours affectionately
BANKIM CH. CHATTERJEE

1. These interjections in parenthesis are probably by the editors of *Nabinchandra Rachanavali*, the collected works of Nabinchandra Sen.

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When I wrote back, I asked him what the subject was of the new 'novel' (*upanyas*) he was writing and urged him, as I had done many times earlier that he should abandon his love of English and, instead, build his new novel around subjects like patriotism, devotion to one's parents, the love between brother and sister—these, as taught in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, being the real elements of our character as a people. He replied that he had acceded to my request and the new *upanyas* was like *Rangamati*—“It follows exactly the lines of your *Rangamati*”—and that because of *Rangamati* he had to alter several chapters. This is what became *Anandamath*.

Rangamati thus came to be published towards the middle of 1880 with the immortal Bankimchandra's sacred name on its dedication page and bearing his fond blessings.

Some time after this, I happened to visit Calcutta from Bihar Sharif and called on Bankimbabu one morning. He lived then in a two-storeyed house in Boubazar. *Anandamath* had just been published and we discussed it as well as *Rangamati*. I told him that his 'Bande-mataram' song would one day be sung as the 'Marseilles' of India. He said, "Indeed! Have you liked it so much?" I praised the song profusely but also observed that he had spoiled it a little by having those lines in Bangla at places. Those lines diminish the power and solemnity of the song. I didn't like them at all and found them quite incongruous. He said, "If you don't like those Bangla lines, you may skip them while reading." I said, "This haughtiness of yours will be the death of us." He smiled a little and asked, "Have you heard the song being sung?" I said I had not, whereupon he said, "You wouldn't feel the way you do if you hear it being sung." I said, "But most people won't hear it being sung—they will read it. And since I believe it should become the national song of India, how will people of other regions understand the song if it has Bangla lines at places. For this reason alone, it may not become India's national song. I think you should change the Bangla words into simple Sanskrit and replace the figure seven crores with thirty crores." He puffed at his tobacco, seemed to be thinking a little,

and did not say anything more.

My prediction has come true. After twentyfive years the song has become the national song of Bengal and those lines in Bangla have prevented it from becoming the national song of India. That is why only the first part is generally sung, and it is necessary that the song should be revised on the lines suggested earlier. Those two words 'Bande-mataram' have become the seeds of India's national awakening. At what inauspicious instant, by what divine power, was this great song composed! It was I who had repeatedly urged Bankimbabu to write a novel on patriotism, so my joy knows no bounds at present. Dear God, all this is your sport! I pray that you may imbue the hearts of this fallen people with unity, equality and strength, so that they can fulfil the promise of this mantra and become a liberated people.

Bankimbabu invited me to a meal that evening and said he would also call some other friends to introduce me to them. He asked, "Are you acquainted with Robi Thakur?" I said, "Very slightly and a long time ago." He said, "You two should meet. He is a talented young man." When I went to his house that evening I met Hembabu¹ and some other invitees. Bankimbabu said, "Robi cannot come for some reason." That evening was most pleasantly spent in much literary discussion. Some time later I was stunned to read 'Robir Chhaya' (Shadow of the Sun) in *Prachar*. I realized that Robibabu had somehow hurt the feelings of Bankimbabu. I did not know what had happened.

From *Amar Jiban* by Nabinchandra Sen

Nabinchandra Rachanavali, Vol. I,

eds. Shantikumar Dasgupta & Haribandhu Mukhoti

Datta Choudhuri & Sons, Bengali Era 1381, Calcutta.

Tr. from Bengali by SUJIT MUKHERJEE

1. Probably refers to Hemchandra Banerji, vide. Introductory Note. p. 123.

The Anguish of a Dalit

A Study of Lakshman Mane's *Upara*

LALITA GOSWAMI

Lakshman Bapu Mane (b. 1949) is one of the well-known Dalit writers in Marathi. His autobiography, *Upara*, his first-ever work, attracted the notice of the literary world and brought him several awards including that of the Sahitya Akademi in 1981.—*Ed.*

LAKSHMAN MANE'S reputation rests primarily on his *Upara*. This autobiography stands along with Daya Pawar's *Balute* as the finest work in the category of protest writing by Dalit writers in Marathi literature.

Upara received several awards and the most prestigious among them are the Sahitya Akademi Award, 1981, and the Ford Foundation Award, along with a grant to enable the writer to visit the USA.

Lakshman Mane has confessed in his foreword to *Upara* that, while writing the book, he had re-lived whatever tortures he had seen, undergone, suffered and experienced in the past and he had the limited intention of illuminating that slice of life which he considered was and is indeed unknown to many in its stark reality. He wanted society to get acquainted with the sufferings of homeless people and do something substantial and constructive for them.

Upara is an odyssey of an ordinary man from a depressed

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class undertaken with the aid of guiding lights like teacher Akuba, Rambhau, Prof. Patgaonkar, Bapusaheb Parulekar, Dr. Dabholkar and Shashi. His journey is social, geographic, historical and philosophical. It is only in the end when he finally surrenders himself to the caste-panchayat that he starts his real life. Up to that point, his life is one of daydreams and illusions divorced from reality.

The title of the book *Upara* is very apt. *Upara* may be translated as 'stranger'. However, the various shades of meaning which are reflected in *Upara* cannot be found in 'stranger'.

The 'stranger' here is Laksha and his life is conditioned by every institution associated with him. He is quite insignificant in his social structure and is a prey to oppression, injustice and chaos.

Mane, in his work, tries to define his status in the present-day Indian society, while trying consciously to embody his stranger's experience. *Upara* is an expression of the anguish and injustice experienced by the Kaikadis or untouchables. At the same time, it is a significant writing about an ordinary man's identity as a human being. The whole book can be summarized as an insignificant man's graphic tale of how he tries to get education, marry a girl of his choice and earn a decent livelihood, while facing every kind of negation, rejection and denial.

The book opens up a new vista of human suffering presenting before us the life-sketch of a young man from the depressed class of the Kaikadis. The Kaikadis are a wandering tribe like gypsies. Some of them have their own houses and land, but for want of a regular income, wandering from place to place along with their donkeys and families is their fate. The menfolk collect bamboo from the jungles, weave baskets and such other useful articles from them for sale. Their women clean, sweep, wash, and repair baskets. Their children usually stay at home, fighting, quarrelling, eating and when necessary begging food. Elder ones take care of smaller children. Being on the lowest rung of the social ladder, the Kaikadis have their dwellings on the outskirts of the village. Their belongings are so few that at the shortest

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notice they can pack up everything, ready to move. When all their energy is spent on just getting a few morsels of food, every day turns into a challenge for them.

Education has made the author-protagonist Mane aware of the socio-economic backwardness of his tribe, and a conscious suffering of the resultant humiliations has produced *Upara*. He recalls in it that the only toys easily available to him were the marbles of soiled stones scattered in the village-ditch, which people frequented as a lavatory. The shirts which he used to wear were invariably the discarded ones and patched up in many places. Only one loose, large-sized shirt would suffice to cover his whole body and hence he had no need of shorts. With astonishing neutrality, he recalls that he was like a dog at a garbage pit.

However, this neutral attitude itself created a firm determination in him to study at whatever cost. It is surprising that in some quarters, *Upara* has been labelled as a white-collared, middle class sell-out, despite the elements of protest, helplessness, local colour, and the power of the caste-panchayat, etc. in the work.

From the standpoint of literary art, *Upara*, dealing with the life of the Kaikadis, is not negligible. It draws upon a peculiarly rich heritage. Its dialectical language enhances beauty on functional and artistic levels. A sociological examination of *Upara* reveals that the author shares a unique experience of living on the razor’s edge of time, resulting in desperate conflict. Working for daily bread, experiencing a sense of alienation result in some sort of inferiority complex, leading to a distorted development of personality. Maybe occasions like annual fairs, visits to the family deity and obligatory food-offerings, marriages, etc. bring a welcome relief to a life otherwise afflicted by miseries and sufferings, and these, one imagines, helped Laksha maintain his poise.

Upara portrays Laksha’s constant and continued efforts to rise upwards in society. He consciously imitated high-caste middle class men. Even Brahmin girls used to run after him, but after coming to know of his caste, turned their backs on him. His

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parents had to leave their native place Nirgudi on account of some baseless scandal connected with Laksha and a high-caste girl. Mutely, they had to suffer everything. The more he tried to get recognition in his own society, the more alienated he became from his very people and community. The highbrow society kept its doors shut against him. His longing to attract the attention of people towards the grievances of his community was so strong that he decided to venture into writing. This was something unique and extraordinary in Mane's case. As he tells us in his book, his own father did not know a *pāti*, the slate, but knew *pāti*, the basket, which he used to weave (In Marathi, the same word, *pāti*, means both). A young man from such a society ventures to write and the act of writing is a creative effort to rise upwards in society and thereby gain an identity which had been denied to him thus far. In fact, the creation of *Upara* has been a successful means of achieving an acute sense of identity and self-recognition.

Little Laksha went to school unwillingly. Laksha recalls that nobody was friendly to him there. His classmates would not touch him. But the teacher was kind. The boy had no slate or pencil. Little Laksha tolerated hootings by his classmates. At that stage, he could not analyse the reasons for his patient tolerance, but it was to gain recognition as a member of the group of his classmates. Later, in high school, he accompanied his classmates to a wedding party and since the other boys pressed, he occupied a seat in a row with others at dinner. The other boys had thought that no one would detect his caste there and they would be allowed to share the joy of partaking food together. But soon he was driven out not for any misdeed but for his caste. Similarly, his eagerness to join picnic parties at school and at college, his participation in social meetings, his efforts to do some social work, his daring to marry out of caste, his desperate but futile attempt to prove himself before the caste-panchayat, his wife's high caste and his final unconditional surrender to make the required adjustment before the caste-panchayat and community—all these present roles which he

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cannot either accept or which demand that he should sacrifice too much in order to find a genuine or fake social identity.

Laksha, as the adolescent schoolboy, was attracted towards easy money, hot spicy food, colourful clothes and daily visits to films under the influence of Chhabya. By helping to make and sell illicit liquor, Laksha could have certainly established a new identity as a gangster, but somehow he resisted it out of fear of law. Sociologically also, this would have been too facile an acquiescence to the stereotype of the poor, low-caste suspects or criminals.

As Laksha moved from one tentative role to another, he tried to cast off earlier parts of his identity which the new roles could not accommodate. Participation in a band-troop is a traditional Kaikadi occupation. Laksha had started it right during his primary-school days. But when he entered college, he gave it up as he became ashamed of it. As a college student, he had developed a strange feeling of disaffection towards his homeless wandering family, that they were inferior to him in all respects. He had stopped telling wayside dwellers that he was one of them. But when it became painfully necessary to support himself and his newly-wed unemployed friend Narayan, he had to go back to his old identity as a member of a band-troop and that did help in time.

At the beginning of the autobiography, Laksha recalls the day he entered school. All his classmates were united against him. This was Laksha's first bitter realization of being an out-caste in an Indian society. The final scene of his appearance before the caste-panchayat and begging forgiveness to get reinstatement in the community is nothing but an enlarged copy of the school situation. There is only one marked difference. The little schoolboy tolerates all those severe insults but instinctively feels that he should not go to school. Later, the mature Lakshman feels like telling his story to the people, as a conscious act of protest, giving vent to his innermost suffering.

After going through the whole of the *Upara*, one can gauge the total reach of the work in its various suggestions. The mean-

ing of the word *Upara* suggests the intense agony of the protagonist at belonging nowhere. The rejection of identity which springs from the feeling of alienation is well reflected in the title, as it powerfully brings before our mental eyes its hero, a person with a very ordinary name, belonging to the lowest stratum of society; secondly, the hero, as a universal man, gathering experience, confronting reality and facing the agony of belonging nowhere; thirdly, the hero as a victim struggling with a system that would reduce him to total negation; fourthly, the hero's struggle as an allegory of the struggle of the oppressed classes in India. In short, thematic preoccupation is a distinguishing characteristic of the title.

Mane's figures of speech, metaphors and similes are concrete, exact and picturesque. For example, just to satisfy hunger, he used to steal bananas or papaya from the nearby plantations. He tells us, "If detected at all, then get flogged, till (half) dead like a dog". Naturally, he refers here to stray country dogs and at once it is clear that the writer hails not from an urban area, but the country.

The narrator's observation of country life, birds, insects, plants and bushes is very minute and lively. This is clear from such a comparison as "Why open this topic (of trip) at home? It would mean stirring up the fighting bees in a hive". Mane is a naive narrator with a lot of anguish and bitterness. The anguish and bitterness become intensely alive when he uses a picturesque simile like "All were staring at her as at a buffalo, about to attack." His accurate observation of nature enables him to reproduce the deafening, heartrending sound of his mother's incessant cursing and weeping when he casually tells us, "Like the bursting and sudden striking of lightning, mother started cursing and weeping". Further the power of *Upara* draws from realistic descriptions and truthful confession of the narrator's agony, pain, anger and helplessness. For example, as when his father says, "Now they will ostracize us, what's to be done? They will force us to swallow our excreta, what should I say? How should I face the five elders of the community? All will

shout and I will have to look down and scratch the ground. Four daughters, to whom to give them in marriage? Is there anyone to accept them without wells?” Or when mother shrieks, “You, you have ruined us! Had I given birth to a stone, it would have been better”.

Mane employs a sort of cumulative device in his outwardly simple plot-structure. The first incident is repeated on a large scale. The protagonist struggles to live by his ideals and will, then is undone by the age-old barriers of caste but not plunged into despair, thanks to the typical Hindu attitude. At least, four times it happens: (a) The young boy’s struggle with his family for schooling; (b) his hunt for a job in order to supplement his income so as to complete college education, leading him back to his age-old family profession; (c) his entry into society and sudden removal from it for his intercaste marriage, and (d) his struggle with his own community, ending in his total surrender.

The uniqueness of *Upara* lies in presenting a totally new slice of life hitherto unknown to the literary world. This is something unusual, something novel and more than the run-of-the-mill writing. It has, as it were, opened up new dimensions of a somewhat ‘exotic’ life. While portraying this ‘exotic’ life, he shifts his style and language from time to time. In the beginning of the book, the language he employs is colloquial, sharp and very often vulgar. Even in ordinary conversation at home, many of his phrases are shocking and indecent to a middle-class reader. For example, when the boy is unwilling to ride further on donkey-back, the father shouts, “Sit, bitch’s milk!” Afterwards, he uses mixed language, part colloquial and part chaste, during the stage of his adolescence. And in the end, he employs only sophisticated, literary language. This automatically helps to strengthen the impression that there are changes in Laksha’s personality. In the beginning, his language tells us about his identity as a boy from a wandering and neglected tribe, belonging to the lowest stratum of society, and that his community is miles away from sophistication, culture and

literacy. Words like social injustice, hypocrisy, oppression are not known to them. In the middle of the book, the adolescent boy uses mixed language which reflects his confusion and indecisive mood, to fix his way firmly towards the goal of his life. In the final chapters, the language is urban, sophisticated and cultured. It suggests that the narrator has thrown off his previous identity and accepted a new one. The fact is that it is the master of chaste language of the final parts, who has created the first part out of totally accurate recall of the idiom of his childhood, a feat of virtuosity in style. It can be said that Mane's dialect is full of colloquial, socially definable idioms. It maintains the rhythm and texture of living speech. By using a relatively loose and simple narrative structure, Mane is able to concentrate on the quality of the experience at hand.

Everything in the book is aimed at showing the inside of Laksha's mind and heart, not mainly to explain a Dalit youth's experiences, but to show how he is affected.

Mane's use of background-setting is also highly suggestive. When he is not conscious about his plight in his innocence or ignorance, the scenery he portrays is picturesque and resplendently bright. Afterwards, the scenery is blurred in order to make realistic psychological description prominent. Traditional folk-expressions like 'Neither mother earth shelters, nor the sky offers help' enhance the beauty of the language. The presentation and penetration of human emotion in simple, short but peculiarly racial dialect is a special quality of *Uparà*. The direction in which it enables the emotion to move and the weight it exerts are exquisitely calculated. Laksha narrates the experience when he passes his first examination thus: "Father came home from the village office. He took me in his arms. He had never done that before. Straightaway he went inside before the image of the family deity, bowed down, applied *kumkum*. What was happening? I do not know. Father was crying before the family deity, tears rolling down his cheeks incessantly. Father was crying, so I also started crying. Looking at us crying, the small ones also started crying. Mother was not at home. Were she

‘UPARA’

there, she too would have cried. Father noticed us crying and shouted, ‘Eh, why are you crying? Is anybody dead?’”

Mane’s passion to represent and give order to experience is amazing. While narrating their itinerant life in the Konkan, he has interwoven the life-story of Marutimama and Parumami, Pingla and Pingli Joshi skilfully without disturbing the flow of narration. He has employed devices of understatement and irony very effectively: “Mother’s dignity was hidden in father’s shirt.” His use of irony provokes a mischievous smile when he writes, “Father, that way, can be called a good man. Leaving me alone (in a crowd), he too was trying to touch and pull the deity’s sacred chain. . .”

Mane tells the tale in monologues and uses flashback. Even though tortured by extreme poverty, hunger, humiliations and a feeling of insecurity and nowhereness, he never nears the peculiar ‘absurd’ mood. His is not an absurd tale. Perhaps ‘meaninglessness’ or ‘emptiness’ of life is a foreign idea to him. Though an untouchable, he is a diehard Hindu and his way of looking at life is partially optimistic, partially governed by the idea of rebirth and sin. As Mane is committed to it, unconsciously his attitude to his own suffering is not existential or absurd, but stoic. The problem of dual identity is particularly acute for a self-made man like Mane. Much of his alienation and consequent suffering spring from his being suspended between two cultural traditions, each with its own claims and loyalties. The educated Kaikadi has been caught on the horns of the dilemma. To identify closely with the life-style of the middle-class leads to a rejection of his community culture. To do the same with the life-style of the Kaikadis means a disaffection with the dominant values of white-collared urban civilization. Thus a conflicting pattern of identification and rejection produces strong currents of alienation resulting in suffering. Laksha, the young graduate, is naturally poised for assimilation, as this alone would be a natural response to the experience of upward mobility. As Laksha entered a different group of people from his own community by virtue of education, income and

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social status, he looked upon his own people with embarrassment and shame. He tried to expunge every trace of Kaikadiness and yet the stamp of caste is indelible. For survival, he had to surrender fully to the taboos of society. He has learnt to live with suffering, to adjust with it without losing the balance of mind. He tried to change, to remove suffering, but the deviation from the accepted norm adds to anguish. He is governed by typical Hindu stoicism, and is hence able to look at suffering with a controlled sob in his throat. Venturing to create a work of art can be called a social action in itself that exhibits Mane's passionate love for life. Ultimately it appeals to the humanity and fellow-feeling in us and that is most gratifying.

When Hunger Stalked

A Dinner Invitation

WE were staying in a muslim locality. Our neighbour's daughter was getting married and we had been invited for dinner. We were thrilled at the prospect of a sumptuous meal and eagerly awaiting the dinner announcement. At home, there was not a single grain of food. It was getting on to nearly eight in the evening, still nobody came to call us for dinner. We were making the round of the pandal unnecessarily...nobody offered us anything... the gentleman who had invited us for dinner was nowhere to be seen. Maybe he was too busy with his other responsibilities. Spicy aroma of *biryani* had spread all over, but we were without luck. Only our noses could smell, but there was nothing for the tongue. All that we could do was to wait for someone to come and call us for dinner. I was left with the last four annas in my pocket. I could buy two bananas with them at least. But even that was not possible now, at it was too late and the shops had been closed. I cursed them all to death. We locked the door and came down to the Shaniwar Chowk... eveyrthing was closed. At last, we shared a cup of tea near a cinema hall and returned home.

I was thinking of my childhood, our attacking the left-overs in the leaf-plates thrown out by the guests. 'Why not?' I wondered. But somehow I could not muster enough courage to tell Shashi. I went out without telling her anything. When I strode

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near the pandal, guests were inviting each other. 'Aao Bhai Aao!' (Come, brother, come). People were eating together from a large common plate. Then it struck me! My God. . . these are muslims! They do not eat like us separately on leaf-plates. . . I returned home, drank a jugful of water. And then the conjugal pleasure. . . for which I had got married. I can't even say that I slept on a hungry stomach, for I kept on tossing in bed. I was cursing the whole world. I was pissing on the system in my thoughts.

Once I had a very good idea. . . Where is the government which runs the country? At Bombay? At Delhi? The madam's slogan 'Garibi Hatao' had caught up with the masses. I had an irrepressible urge of dropping a bomb on the Parliament and putting an end to this eczema. . . I dreamt that night that I was dropping a bomb on the Parliament and watching those who owed something to us, the downtrodden, going to pieces. I would burn inside myself like a fire suppressed within. When somebody talked of the policy of reservation, I would feel like slitting his throat. Everything appeared futile. I felt like stripping off the masks from the faces around.

A Specie called 'Human'

FRANKLY speaking, I had lost my trust in human beings and humanity. When my own parents had severed links with me, where could I turn for support? But Kale was optimistic. So I gave in and decided to take a chance.

A young man with a broad grin answered the door-bell. Kale introduced him to me—"He is Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, he works here for Young Socialist Forum. . ."

We casually talked about intercaste marriages, etc. Then he

EXCERPTS FROM 'UPARA'



Drawing : Jai Zharotia

asked me some personal questions such as what I was doing presently and where I came from, etc. I could read sympathy in his eyes. But I became self-conscious with stubs of beard on my face, my soiled clothes, etc. I was feeling ashamed of myself. I gave him some sketchy information I could not just bring myself to give him the whole truth. After some time, Dr. Dabholkar said, "I am working at Parel. . ." Will you please come again around six? We will talk at length. . ." This person is a socialist, a co-traveller, maybe he will do something for me, I thought. I rose up to leave hopefully. I was returning empty-handed, but the ray of hope had strengthened.

I went again around 7.30 in the evening. Dr. Dabholkar was seeing a patient. He asked me to wait inside. I could see an elderly woman moving around. She could not have been his wife. Such a promising doctor, elder to me in age, was not married and I kept on wondering. Just then he walked in. We

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discovered that we had a whole lot of common friends. We clicked instantly. He got up and went inside. He was talking to that woman in whispers. I thought he would give me a cup of tea and get rid of me. I kept on looking at the photographs on the wall. He came back with lots of bags in both his hands. Wheat, rice, jowar, pulses, whatever he had at home, he was offering to me including a can of kerosene and a tin of edible oil. If someone had told me a few minutes back that I was to get all these, I would have dismissed it as a cruel joke. The bags were filled with grains. He fished in his pocket and took out a twenty-rupee note. I was moving like a puppet. I thought I was dreaming. He said, "Take all this. If you need anything more, come to me without any hesitation. Do not think that we are alien to you." I was feeling terribly awkward under this burden of obligation.

I do not know how I reached home with all those things. I could not tell anything to Shashi, but only burst into tears. I kept on sobbing for quite some time. Then between sobs I told her all about it. I never believed in God but if he was around he was in those bags. I was convinced that a specie called 'human being' was still alive somewhere. Why should a stranger trust me so much and go out of his way to help me? Thoughts would throng in my mind. I felt like crying aloud. . .I was used only to neglect and hatred up till now.

Tr. by ARUNDHATI DEOSTHALE

More than Mere Translation

Poems of Love and War

From the Eight Anthologies and the Long Poems of Classical Tamil

Selected and Translated by A.K. Ramanujan

Oxford University Press, New Delhi

Pp. 329, Rs. 80.

AN APT TERM for describing these translations of Tamil classical poetry done by A.K. Ramanujan would be 'unravelling'. Ramanujan unravels the stitch and weave of the poem and re-weaves it over the distaff of the English language. When it comes to re-working stitching, he seems not to attempt it beyond the bare minimum—some tacking here and there, no more.

To appreciate this latter aspect of the translation better, one should perhaps change the metaphor from the distaff to things more intrinsically connected with sound—flutes, or varieties of wind instruments, say. The question is one of choosing the right instrument through which to pass the sounds of a language, and produce melody. Ramanujan sees with poetic intuitiveness and, as a finality of translation work, realizes that no instrument of one clime will receive and be a proper corridor for the sounds of another. The trans-castings of Tamil sounds and substances into English that he makes, therefore, are left as individual notes, with no conscious attempt at harmonizing them.

The result, however, is unforeseen. As he puts it in the Afterword—a beautiful and lucid piece of writing in itself—

“Crossing languages, one current and foreign, another current and familiar, searching in one language for forms and tones that will mimic and relive those of another, he (the translator) may fashion now and then a third that will look like the one and speak like the other.”

This is precisely what has happened. The poems are obviously un-English in tone, psychology and imagery. The sensitive and contemporary application of the English language to this un-English mind produces what can only be called a perfect and creative laboratory product. Here is one poem. We can indeed pick up any poem at random.

Her eyes
 lined with kohl
 once grown yellow as cassias
 now have their old beauty
 of purple lilies in mountain pools
 now that you,
 tiger of the long battle-fronts of victorious war,
 have come back.

The sinews and sound reservoirs of Tamil are obvious enough in these lines. ‘Tiger of the long battle-front of victorious war’ surely must have been a compound phrase, the kind that results from a stacking of words—like bricks being stacked—and which seems a characteristic of classical languages. Ramanujan *has* attempted a stacking: we can sense the hyphens between the words. But by the logic of translation, his stacking must have been preceded by an analysis and breaking up of composition and formation, a process which, in the original, could at the most, have been implicit. And the logic forced by this non-implicitness is what Ramanujan applies with the utmost taste and sensitivity to the phrase—as indeed, he does to the translations throughout.

This logic, in its application and practical effects, imparts an openness to the poems, a kind of transparency as from leaves held against the light, throwing into relief the veins and the life-



Drawing : Jai Zharotia

giving ducts of the bodies. In this particular phrase, 'tiger of . . .', each word draws itself out, makes its individual presence felt, and makes but a partial step back to base. We do not get an integrated picture, a unity, till seconds later, as the words fall into place in our minds and slide closer to one another, impelled by the synthesizing energies natural to the mind when confronted by dispersal. But what is achieved still remains a slight work of welding, not the hard, graspable and almost physically-felt interlock of metaphor and reality that would characterize the original.

Not only with this phrase, but with the whole linguistic tenor of the poems and the working in of the sense content into the holds of the language, there is a wide, loosened quality that makes for separate units of luminosity. 'Lined with kohl' forms one unit. 'Eyes' and 'her' separate into two units from a single line. 'Yellow as cassias' is a fourth. 'Old beauty' another. 'Purple lilies in mountain pools' is a constellation in itself.

What unites these systems and spheres of light is the very

controlled and modulated voice of the poet, sounding through the syntax, through the verbs and action words, through a delicate winding with the poetic voice of the original and becoming as much its echo as possible, given the odds.

Echo, it must be noted, and not amanuensis. For the poems were recited. Composed for recitation, they were the fruits of an oral world. The dos and don'ts of this world were derived from codes and from ideas of propriety in which we of the present times cannot easily see ourselves. A starving poet, for instance, could be candidly and in good faith directed by a fellow-poet to the home of a munificent patron where he would be given 'lotuses of gold' that—the adviser adds wryly—'no bee will touch'. (A Guide to Patrons: one bard to another. Alattur Kilar: on Killi Valavan. *Purananuru* 69, pp. 127-128).

This kind of confidential exchange—shop-talk—between fellow poets could never form a subject-matter of poetry today, and it was in this climate of earthy candour, of an open upholding of status and rank, giver and receiver, patron and client, that the poems were recited, their particular lyrical forms and tensions developed.

Becoming aware of this social climate and of the sensibility it bred as reflected in the poem is necessary to appreciate them, and also for a full measure of the translator's achievement. One has to learn to hear the voice of this sensibility. Ramanujan stalks this voice patiently, tirelessly, crawling towards its main nerve cords like a panther flat on its body crawling towards its prey. Once in his grasp, he enters the bodies of the nerve-cords, activates the timbre of their voice and guides it round the shapes of English. Through this device—like an early gramophone—he resurrects a whole social order as reflected in its poetic tradition. The resulting lyrical articulation by itself is evocative enough. In addition, each poem has a straightforward, self-explanatory title, supported by minor title-lines below, which provide their own information. The following, for example:

As the lovely new flower
of the small-leaved cow's thorn

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covers the meadows
and gives birth
to thorns,

my lover who was kind
now does evil,

and I'm sick at heart.

(Allur Nanmullai, *Kuruntokai*, 202)

The imagery is not today's. The sensuous closeness with nature is certainly not today's. There is a pastoralism in it, grown remote for us. Also there is a specificity. The placing of the word 'thorns' in the composition of image and meaning in the poem is unusual, possessing a savagery not native to our times. The act of love has resulted in a crop of thorns, the heroine seems to be saying. The act of love itself has been visualized in terms of the mystery of fertilization and its seen, outward results. '...and gives birth to thorns...' the line reads, coming immediately after the heavy erotic description of the flower in the first three lines. We feel as though the woman's body has broken out in nettles after lovemaking—an awesome and loathsome sensation: and again, something not modern about it.

With this much sense of time yielded by the lines, along with the deflection of voice conveyed by the title 'What She Said', and the otherwise straight meaning of the words, one doesn't need anything more to savour the poem

In the Afterword, what Ramanujan does is to draw attention to the esoteric aspect of the poems, the in-formulae and conventions of composition, their alphabet, so to say. It is a rounding off by means of scholarship, of the articulateness given to the poems through the methods and means of poetry. It is a symmetrical extension. Taken with the poems, the whole work, indeed, is a beautiful work of literary archaeology.

RAJI NARASIMHAN

A Reliable Translation

Mahindi and Other Short Stories

Tr. from Punjabi by Harbans Singh
Navyug Publishers, Delhi.
Pp. 114, Rs. 50. 1984

SHORT STORY happens to be one genre in which modern Punjabi literature is exceptionally rich. It is an index of the indifference of the urban Punjabi elite towards the literary genius of the language that the excellence and uniqueness of the Punjabi writing has not been projected to the outside world in a measure and manner worthy of its wealth and variety. This neglect becomes all the more pronounced when it comes to translating Punjabi writings into English or from other western languages. No doubt the Sikh sacred texts have been translated into English and some of these translations are marked by a literary flavour of a really high order. But the real motivation in this direction has been more religious than literary. The secular writings, whether medieval or modern, have not attracted much attention of the translators except either for ideological considerations or of public relations. Selections of modern Punjabi short stories in Russian translations published in the Soviet Union belong to the former category while the inclusion of some assorted Punjabi poems or short stories in the anthologies of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations answer to the demands of the latter.

For reasons which I shall avoid going into here in detail, the riches of Punjabi writing have remained untouched by an overwhelming majority of the modern western-educated sections of Punjabi society. These sections cultivated and identified themselves with Urdu and later on with Hindi streams of writing in Punjabi except for cursory or patronizing interest in the stream of Punjabi writings. The upper and the upper middle-class protagonists of Urdu and Hindi writing hardly took any cognizance of the efforts of their kindred souls in Punjabi writing. No

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wonder, therefore, that the readership for Punjabi came to be greatly constricted to the emergent Sikh middle class. Whatever the socio-cultural consequences of this development, it left an indelible mark not on the content alone but also on the language, tone and setting of much of the Punjabi writing rendering it sensitive and responsive to Sikh susceptibilities. While reading through the short stories in the present collection, one is struck by the fact that except for one story ('The Old Woman's Tin-Can' by Balwant Gargi) all others are by Sikh writers. Whenever a writer ventures beyond the typical Sikh ethos as in the case of Amrita Pritam, Kartar Singh Duggal or Mohan Singh, the non-Sikh setting serves the function of a rhetorical device and the constructed gestalt betrays the awkwardness of an outsider rather than the authentic sureness of touch of an insider.

Mahindi is a collection of Punjabi short stories rendered in English by Harbans Singh, except for two stories, Ajeet Cour's 'The Legend of Carignano' and Navtej Singh's 'Vote for Nehru' translated by Nripindar Singh, his talented son. Before the appearance of this collection, there had been a few others in English translation. The ones selected and translated by Surinder Singh Johar (*Pick of Punjabi Short Stories*) and a joint venture by Mahip Singh and Gurmukh Singh Jeet have attracted attention more for the number of entries than their merit as translations. Sant Singh Sekhon has made a good job of his undertaking for the Language Department of Punjab, but it has missed critical notice because of the low credibility of its publishers.

Broadly speaking, the Punjabi short story has evolved in three distinct phases after its emergence as a creative form. The first phase starting with the pioneering efforts of Nanak Singh and Gurbakhsh Singh registered a breakthrough for the form, from the traditional morality or mystery tales. The works of these masters and the early works of a new generation of writers that started attracting notice during the late thirties and early forties constituted a compact whole, sharing quite a few characteristics and thematic and formal tendencies. Kartar Singh Duggal, Mohan Singh (who gave up the cultivation of the genre after

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a remarkable collection most probably because of his exclusive devotion to his career as a poet), Sant Singh Sekhon, Kulwant Singh Virk and Surinder Singh Narula belong to this group.

The second phase took shape in the early fifties and was greatly influenced by the ideas and motifs of the progressive movement in which some of these new writers also made their mark. During this phase, Punjabi short story gained a good deal by way of ideological commitment at the cost of its earlier lyricism.

For a long period after the progressive short story exhausted itself as a creative form, it showed signs of withering away into all sorts of formalism and self-indulgence for exercise of the virtuosity of the dilettante. In the late seventies, the Punjabi short story ushered in a new phase of an unprecedented vigour and vitality deriving from the self-discovery and self-articulation by a group of writers belonging to the socially and economically deprived and disinterested classes.

Prof. Harbans Singh, both by association and aesthetic inclination, is more sensitive to the writings of the first phase. The stories selected for inclusion in this collection bear an eloquent testimony to this statement. Of the writers included in this collection, only Navtej Singh, Ajit Cour and Mohinder Singh Joshi can be placed outside the category of the pioneers, but a closer appraisal of the stories of the authors selected reveal that in spirit and atmosphere these are more akin to the writings of the early masters than their other works. More deliberately than otherwise, Harbans Singh has lent his critical authority to the recognition of the literary excellence of a body of writing which was unjustly neglected by the protagonists both of progressism and modernism. The collective impact of the stories assembled in this collection inheres in discovering the innocence of being and the abiding grace of human existence.

Ranging between the discovery of the realm of innocence in the human situation and the human bondage in the face of the anomic and the tragic, these stories provide sparkling vignettes of the Punjabi experience. 'The Blades of Grass' by Kulwant Singh Virk, dealing with the resurrection of human spirit in the

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midst of the collapse of a whole world of meaning and significance in the wake of partition of the Punjab and the riots and killings attendant upon it, provides a glimpse of the inherent capacity of the human will to prevail. It is a story of a woman abducted during the communal riots striking her roots in a new environ of human relations amongst her abductors. In the midst of many a tale of sentimental outpourings, this piece shines for its unshakable faith in the uncanny wisdom of the demands of life. Another remarkable short narrative of his is 'The Bull beneath the Earth' redolent of the inner strength of the Punjabi peasantry to bear its cross. 'Pemi's Children' by Sant Singh Sekhon achieves the quality of a parable in typifying the faith of children in the omnipotence of their mother to rescue them in a situation beyond their own devices. In Santokh Singh Dhir's 'The Common Wall' the closed circuit of the petty disputes over the construction of a partition wall within the common house divided between two cousins, endemic to the human instinct of territoriality in a typically Punjabi setting, is described in realistic detail. But where Dhir excels is in his vision of the possibility of an appeal to the inherent goodness of man to transcend the divisions and find fulfilment in human compulsion to reach out to the one in distress.

Slightly more clinical is the account of the frustrations in the life of a small-time official holding a featureless position in an office coming painfully to terms with the reality of denial and humiliation, the failures and frustrations through the hopes of making it by winning a lottery, sketched out by Kartar Singh Duggal, the consummate artist of the form in 'The Derby Sweep-stake'. Survival even by substitution of a faith in oneself by an irrational hope in chance is made to appear as preferable to suicide often contemplated. Of the other stories in the collection 'Kanjak' by Amrita Pritam contrasts the conventional attitude of a self-denying child-widow and a self-indulgent virgin in the background of the Hindu ritual of virgin-worship with suggestions of indignation more moral than humanistic. Mohan Singh's 'Fragrant Charm' is as lyrical as tragic in delineating the loss of

innocence and the pains of the awakening of the desire as experienced by a village belle. In 'The Gods', Gurmukh Singh Musafir resorts to the comic and satirical in portraying the selfishness of the emergent breed of the go-getters. 'Mahindi' by Mohinder Singh Joshi is more loud than his other works but succeeds eminently in projecting the pathos of the dehumanizing custom of dowry. Except for these two last stories, all others included in the volume draw attention to the positive aspects of human character and conduct. This attitude of faith in man and his works is deeply rooted in the humanistic vision of the early generation of Punjabi short story writers. Theirs is a world peopled not by gods but human beings, no less dignified in their generosity of soul and in abiding trust in human goodness. The character-types they favour answer to the fascination of the Punjabi psyche with the romantic, the self-effacing, the wayward and the non-normative.

Harbans Singh is a name highly respected for his rich contribution to Sikh studies. A product of the creative ferment enlivened in the Khalsa College, Amritsar, in the early forties he imbibed an engaging interest in Punjabi literary renaissance as well. Both as an arbiter of literary excellence and interpreter of the Punjabi literary ethos, he does not have many peers. The present volume adds to his stature both for his critical acumen substantiated by his choice of some of the most charming pieces of short fiction but also in making them available in English translation which could hardly be improved upon. The translator has a firm command not only on the source language but also on the target one. He does not miss any nuance of the original, any twist of the phrase, any manipulation of the usage. He has no use for puerile literalism and strives hard to find creative approximations rather than exotic equivalents.

On all counts, *Mahindi* constitutes a reliable and thoroughly enjoyable contribution to the steadily growing corpus of the representative Punjabi writings in English translation.

ATTAR SINGH

The Neustadt Prize for Raja Rao



INDIAN-ENGLISH WRITING achieves a new stature of international recognition with the announcement of the Neustadt Prize for 1988 in February this year to Sri Raja Rao, the distinguished novelist of *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent and the Rope* fame. With this, he joins that select band of great international writers, among whom are the Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti, the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz and the Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marques.

The Neustadt Prize, which, over years, has come to be looked upon as the American equivalent to the Nobel Prize, is awarded once in two years by an international jury of writers, some of whom of the past years later received the Nobel Prize themselves. It has been instituted by the University of Oklahoma and its literary journal, *World Literature Today* (formerly *Books Abroad*). Besides a cash award of 25,000 dollars, it carries a certificate and a replica cast in silver of an eagle feather.

Raja Rao was selected from out of a panel of eleven names nominated for the Prize and the French poet Rene Char was the runner-up. Raja Rao was sponsored and championed by Edwin Thumboo, the poet from Singapore, who described him as a "metaphysical novelist" who has "brought about certain linguistic innovations within the English language, broadening it, adapting it, making it into a pliable instrument capable of responding fully, imaginatively, creatively to large, mixed and challenging materials he had to bring to his fiction". Ivar Ivask, the Chairman of the Jury, said that with this award they were "breaking out of a purely western hegemony" and "it is a new challenge, a new literature, a new world for many of us".

World Literature Today is planning to bring out in November this year a special issue featuring Raja Rao and his works.

Dear Reader

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is the availability of the talents of a dozen writers from each of the twentytwo languages, capable of writing well in English and ready to deliver goods at short notice. With such a team of some 250 contributors, oh what wonders can be done! Whatever the limitations and however legitimate the reasons, it will remain a lasting regret of this editor that he could not arrange for enough coverage in some languages.

Talking of the paucity of translators, there is also an obverse side to it. Quite often, it so happens that the ready availability of one or two translators from some languages, eager, enterprising and with acceptable literary tastes, may tilt the balance in favour of those languages with their too-frequent contributions. Like the tail wagging the dog, as the saying goes. In the larger interests of the journal, one has to acquiesce to them, for otherwise the journal would be poorer without those works. How one wishes that there were such willing saviours in every language!

The translation's is one area where our young Indian-English writers can contribute meaningfully. Most of them, one imagines, have a mother tongue of their own in which they uttered their first word from their mother's lap and were later schooled. Alongside of their creative writing and critical effusions which go begging these days, can they not cultivate the art of translation from their languages and earn the gratitude of the whole country? Is not the model set by stalwarts like A.K. Ramanujan, Jayant Mahapatra and, more recently, Shiv K. Kumar exemplary?

The thematic approach in presenting poetry, referred to earlier, had its counter-effect too. At times, some good stray poems from some languages had to be kept aside, hoping that it would be possible to collect some more representative ones from those languages and use them as part of a bunch for achieving a spectrum-effect. But it did not happen. Probably, one or two general numbers a year, set apart for such contributions, would

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have been the right solution. It is a belated realization, not without regrets.

Now about the problems and challenges: They are such as emanate from a single central situation which can be best described as 'a lack of literary climate' in the country. In order to thrive best, a journal like the *IL* needs not only good writers and good material, but also a literary climate in which writers readily come forward to meet and interact, and contribute through the journal to the common cause of literature. One feels the need of it most when one wants to take the journal beyond the level of a 'completion' or a 'compilation' to a state where it can become a live literary presence.

By and large, our writers are an insular lot. Each is an island unto himself, remote, detached and aloof. There is very little interaction between one writer and another, and between them as a group and the readers. They would not look beyond their own writings and their cooperation would generally be limited to an occasional contribution, more often written for a different occasion or purpose, such as some seminar. Once in a way, one might hope for a forced participation from them in discussions on general theoretical issues. In all these four years, this editor has waited in vain for a writer of any consequence to come forward and say, "Look, this is a matter which needs focussing. I have something to say on it. Can you give me a page?" The issue could have been anything: some one's book just published and deserving wider exposure through a review, a good work gone under by default, some literary work banned in a state, a wrong policy of the government in dealing with some literary matter, a wrong reaction to some work from the readers, etc. As for their fellow-writers, they would be afraid of making an enemy of them if they wrote a critical comment on their work. A whisper is all that one can overhear!

In this situation, what should one do if one wants to infuse new blood into the journal with personal writings of writers, like memoirs, reminiscences, autobiographicals, pen-sketches, view-points, travelogues, focus on current literary issues, etc.

Dogged perseverance alone is the answer, and the *IL* has considerably succeeded in denting into the situation. But much more remains to be done.

One of the basic things that promotes individual initiative and involvement in any field of human activity is the freedom which the system allows to its workers. The trouble with controls is that they overcontrol, in the sense that the individual feels psychologically hamstrung and is always afraid to act. Fortunately, thanks to the immense understanding shown by the Editorial Board (it is since reconstituted from February this year), consisting of the then-President Prof. V.K. Gokak, a man of rare vision, the then-Vice-President Sri Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya and the Secretary Prof. Indra Nath Choudhuri, this editor can claim to have enjoyed unfettered freedom in his work, which is the single largest factor that contributed to the success of the journal. On his part, he can say that he never once gave the authorities an occasion to complain that he had overreached in any matter. He had always kept before him the high image and the ideals of the great institution of which he was a part and also of its founding-fathers with some of whom he had closely worked and its guiding lights of today. For him, it was like working with one's family. Similarly, he enjoyed abundant affection, good will and cooperation of the writers from all over the country who always made his job easier. He had always a good word from his readers which gave him constant encouragement. Now, at this parting hour, the feeling uppermost in his heart is one of gratitude to all of them and also a sense of fulfilment that he did not do a bad job, after all.

Probably, the best way to close this farewell note is to quote the lines of a Kannada tripadi, which had been held over from the last issue for this occasion:

The corn is over, but my songs remain
 The finger-ring is wearing out
 I'll now say farewell to you, O Stone.

S. Balu Rao

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I, Indra Nath Choudhuri, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

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